Saivism
For Beginners

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Saivism For Beginners

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Dedication:

I dedicate this book to all my Saiva - Tamil teachers with Sincere gratitude for their generosity in imparting Saiva knowledge to me

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Siva Siva

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MESSAGE

Any subject to be taught should start from its elementary principles. Even complicated subjects are taught in a simple way in the beginning. The principle of teaching is to teach simple things first and hard things later. Known things are introduced first and unknown things are taught next. This principle also applies to the teaching of Saiva Siddhanta.

We are happy to know that Meikandar Adhinam of London is bringing out an introductory book for Saivism with the title 'Saivism for Beginners'. It is a welcome effort, because, we, the saivites, have to make youngsters to understand Saivism and create interest in the religion.

The knowledge of Saivism should be perpetuated through the younger generation and it should be taught not withstanding the odds. Non-Vedic religions and atheism are spreading their views in the South-East Asia and pose a challenge to Sanadhana Dharma. We have to protect our religion and keep our youngsters in our fold.

This is the right time that the book 'Saivism for Beginners' should appear now and target the Saivite learners. We wish that the book is printed in great number and distributed through out the world for the benefit of Saivites living abroad.

May Lord Senthilandavan Shower His blessings on the author and publishers for their immense service.

Subham

திருச்சிற்றம்பலம்



ஸ்தாபகர். Founder
தவத்திரு. சிவநந்தி அடிகள்



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இலண்டன் மெய்கண்டார் ஆதீனம்
London Meikandar Adheenam

MESSAGE

IT GIVES US GREAT PLEASURE IN BRINGING OUT THE PRESENT BOOK TITLED SAIVISM FOR BEGINNERS WRITTEN BY DR. AHNAIMUGAN.

WE APPRECIATE DR. AHNAIMUGAN'S DEDICATED SERVICES TO THE SAIVA TAMIL COMMUNITY. THE BOOK IS AIMED MAINLY TOWARDS THE GROWING YOUNGSTERS ABROAD. IT SHOULD GIVE THE READERS THE NECESSARY INSPIRATION TO LEARN MORE OF OUR RELIGION.

OUR THANKS TO DR K. GANESALINGAM, ADHEENA PULAVAR OF THE LONDON MEIKANDAR ADHEENAM, FOR HAVING READ THE BOOK AND GUIDED THE AUTHOR TO MAKE THE NECESSARY CORRECTIONS AND POLISH UP THE CONTENTS.

WE ARE VERY GRATEFUL TO THAVATHIRU SUNDARAMURTHI THAMBIRAN SWAMIGAL, JOINT HEAD OF SRI KASI MUTT OF THIRUPPANANDAL, WHO BLESSED THE BOOK WITH A MESSAGE.

IN PARTICULAR, WE OWE A GREAT DEAL TO OUR LATE SWAMI SIVANANDI ADIKALAR'S SON G. JEYARAJ, TREASURER OF THE WORLD SAIVA COUNCIL, FOR HELPING IN THE PUBLICATION OF THE BOOK.

WE PRAY TO THE SUPREME LORD SIVA AND PARVATHY TO BLESS US ALL.

HUMBLE SERVANT OF THE LORD SIVA.

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FOREWORD

Siddhantharatnam, Dr. K. Ganesalingam

Consultant Saiva Philosopher,

London Meikandaar Aadheenam

Saivism is an ancient religion having a rich heritage and glorious past. Its philosophy, Saiva Siddhanta, is praised as the most rational and logical philosophy by scholars. Saiva Tamils have every reason to be proud of their religion.

Unfortunately, the Saivites now show no interest in knowing their religious philosophy and practice and are allowing themselves to be misled in many ways. For them religion is now confined to temple worship and festivals. They are confusing their rational philosophy with other philosophies.

Many Saiva temples have come up and some are still coming up in foreign lands. Saiva Agamas, which lay the criteria for temple construction, are not followed in many temples. Deities, unacceptable to Saivism, are being installed and the Saiva public is allured to worship them and follow all kinds of meaningless rituals. This unfortunate situation is now seen in both the native and foreign lands.

The Saivites living outside their home country have limited or no facility to know their religion. Any religious knowledge they gain is based on few books available in English and the words of some platform speakers. In the name of Hinduism views unacceptable to Saivism are generally fed to them.

Having realised this pathetic situation, Dr Ahnaimugan of New Zealand has written this book, *Saivism for Beginners*, with a view of enlightening the younger generation on Saiva religion.

The book carries fourteen chapters. They deal with various aspects of Saiva religion and explain them with ease. First two chapters speak of Saivism and Hinduism. A common doubt prevailing among many about the words Saivism and Hinduism is cleared in these chapters. He has correctly indicated that Hinduism, unlike Saivism, is not a religion by itself, but a common name denoting many Indian religions.

The chapters following them speak of various deities, Saiva religious works, Samaya Kuravars, Saiva symbols and temple worship. The chapters dealing with Saiva philosophy, yoga, meditation, puranic stories and festivals are explained with valuable related details for the benefit of all. In writing his book, the author has also touched on few details outside Saivism, which are commonly known to the Saivites.

Apart from the temple rituals, the rituals at home from birth to death and various kinds of fasting are also given. These are useful information to the Saivites, particularly those in foreign land, who follow their customary practices without knowing the meaning of them. An overview of the book is given in the last chapter.

In short, this book presents valuable details necessary for the Saivites, and even for others of the Hindu fold. By writing this book, the author, Dr Ahnaimugan, has done a great service in imparting Saiva knowledge to those in the Western countries, particularly to the younger generation.

We appreciate his work and appeal to the world Saivites to buy this invaluable book which helps them to know their great religion. We pray to Lord Siva to bless him with long and healthy life.

Dr K. Ganesalingam, Australia

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FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

This book is written at the request of my son who was born and bred in New Zealand, so that people like him could learn about our religion and understand our culture. The original idea for this book came after he asked me to give him some books on Saivism to read. After reading these books, he told me that he found it difficult to tell the difference between Hinduism and Saivism. Indeed, many of the books I had given him spoke only of Hinduism and did not even mention Saivism. He also found that many of the concepts in the books were difficult to understand.

He suggested to me that perhaps I should write a book about our religion (Saivism) targeted at people like him, who had grown up as children of displaced Tamils in Western countries.

I took up his suggestion and wrote this book *'Saivism for Beginners'*. Therefore this book is not just about our religion but also our way of life, since I feel it is an integral part of being a Saivite (follower of the Saiva religion).

I have tried to ensure that this book is presented in an easy to understand format, which I hope will benefit many. This book is written for beginners, not scholars. It contains many of my own ideas along with ideas that I borrowed from many other authors (listed at the end of the book under References).

I am a retired medical practitioner. I lived and worked as an Obstetrician and Gynaecologist for most of my adult life in a Western country (New Zealand). Even during my working life I had a strong interest in our religion. Since retiring, I have also studied many of the other religions (including completing a one year course in World Religions at Massey University in New Zealand) and been able to devote more time to extensively studying Saivism. I have used the knowledge I have gained to write this book.

Saivism is the main branch of the Hindu religion. Followers of Saivism (Saivites) worship Lord Siva as their Supreme God. The Saiva religion is practised by the majority of Tamils in South India, Sri Lanka and many other parts of the world.

The history of mankind has shown that man cannot live without God. Belief in God or in a cosmic power is basic to all cultures. Jesus Christ stated: "Man cannot live by bread alone".

Our ancestors feared natural events such as fires, storms, floods as well as natural predators. To protect themselves they began to pray to the various forces of nature like the Sun, the Moon, Fire (Agni), Storms (Indra) and the Sea (Varuna) as their Gods. They offered animal sacrifices to placate these Gods. Religion therefore arose out of fear and gave our ancestors some semblance of security in an otherwise insecure world.

Today, religion has taken many forms in various cultures and individuals. Although there are countless religions, they all serve the same purpose. Each answers questions that all humans seem to be programmed to ask:

Who Am I?

Where did I come from?

Where am I going?

What is my destiny?

What should I do to fulfil my destiny?

In this book, I have attempted to give some answers to these questions from a Saiva point of view.

I am often asked, especially by young people, how can one reconcile learning about religion with scientific thought? Science and religion are often seen as opposed to each other. Indeed in 16th Century Europe, people like Giordano Bruno (who suggested that space was boundless and that the sun and its planets were but one of any number of similar systems) were burnt at the stake for their "blasphemy".

It should be noted though, that this tension between science and religion has never been so obvious in Saivism/Hinduism. In the 9th century AD, Manikkavasakar, a Saiva saint spoke of the idea of an expanding universe, 700 years before Bruno! Furthermore, my feeling is that rather than being opposed to each other, science and religion actually share a common goal, the search for truth. Science attempts to answer the "how" and "what" questions of observable and verifiable phenomena while religion attempts to answer the "why" questions of value, morals and spirituality.

"There are many people in the scientific community, in the United States and around the world, who hold strong religious point of view and do not see their points of view conflicting with working in science or even with the philosophy of science" (Kenneth R. Miller).

Albert Einstein once spoke on the relationship of science and religion:

"*I do not think that it is necessarily the case that science and religion are natural opposites. In fact, I think that there is a very close connection between the two. Further, I think that science without religion is lame and, conversely, that religion without science is blind. Both are important and should work hand-in-hand...a legitimate conflict between science and religion cannot exist.*"

In line with wanting to make this a book about a broader "way of life," I have included chapters explaining "Saiva Festivals and Holidays" as well as "Rituals at Home". I have also included a chapter on Tamil marriage ceremonies. I have found over the years that many people, including those who have had a Tamil wedding, do not understand many aspects of the ceremony!

There are some parts of the book devoted to aspects of "Saiva Philosophy" and "Yoga and Meditation" that may be a little advanced and difficult to understand. I have included these in the book only to ensure completeness and to give a taste of

areas that some readers may want to study further. As I said earlier, this book is written for readers with no previous knowledge (or minimal knowledge) of Saivism/ Hinduism. This is only an introduction and I hope it encourages you to learn more about our religion.

Finally, I must acknowledge the help I received from my friends and family. First, I would like to thank my son, Kandeepan, for asking me to write this book and reviewing the book many times during its formation. I am especially grateful to Dr Ganesalingam (of Meikandaar Aatheenam, London) for reviewing the book, giving constructive criticism and providing me with a foreword to the book. I am also thankful to Yoganantha Adikal, president of the World Saiva Council, for his help, blessings and arranging the publishing of the book through the World Saiva Council.

The proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to World Saiva Council.

Dr. S. Ahnaimugan,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand,
March 2012

CHAPTER 1: SAIVISM

Saivism is the name of the religion followed by those who worship Lord Siva as the supreme deity. It is the oldest, prehistoric religion existing from pre-Aryan times dating back as far as 3000 BC. The term Hinduism is used today to cover many Indian religions including Saivism, which is the dominant religion. Hinduism is referred to as "Sanatana Dharma". Sanatana means eternal and Dharma can be loosely defined as the "the values of life that sustain us" (See Chapter 2).

In the 9th century AD, a Hindu philosopher named Sangara classified Hinduism into six branches and referred to them as "Shan matham" or "Aruvakai Samayam". This has created much confusion amongst the followers of Saiva faith. He classified Hinduism of today into Saivism, Vaishnavam, Saktham, Ganaapathiyam, Kaumarum and Souram. The denominations differ primarily in the God worshipped as their Supreme deity and in the traditions that accompany worship of that God.

According to this classification, Saivism considers Siva as the Supreme deity. Likewise Vaishnavam, Saktham, Ganaapathiyam, Kaumarum and Souram consider Vishnu, Sakthi, Ganapathi (Ganesha), Murugan, and the Sun, as their respective Supreme deities.

In reality, Saivism is the religion that is practised by many in South India, Sri Lanka and many other parts of the globe. Vishnu worship is also very popular. Worship of Sakthi is less common, practised mainly in Bengal in Northern India. The other religions (Ganaapathiyam, Kaumarum and Souram) are not in existence now or have been absorbed into the other three branches of Hinduism.

Saivism is called *Saiva Samayam* in Tamil. It is an ancient religion not founded by any prophet or saint. The origins of Saivism can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization some time between 3300 and 1300 BC, but it probably existed long before this time.

Sir John Marshall (Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1920 to 1931, responsible for the excavation that led to the discovery of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, two of the main cities that comprised the Indus valley civilization) said, "Amongst all the religions of the world, Saivism is the most ancient religion. It goes back to the Palaeolithic age" (the period called the Old Stone Age dating between 500,000-10,000 BC).

Reverend G.U. Pope wrote, "Saivism is the oldest prehistoric religion of South India, essentially existing from pre-Aryan times".

Tamils are of Dravidian origin. Many believe that the Dravidians were spread throughout the Indian subcontinent before the Indo-Aryan migrations. They lived in the Indus valley regions with a well-established civilization, as has been revealed by numerous excavations. They were established in north-western India as early as 3000 BC, roughly the same period as the pyramids on the Nile. They achieved a comparable technology to that of the pyramid builders. They were skilled at building planned cities (buildings made of baked bricks of the same size and weight) with water supply, irrigation systems and public sanitation (underground sewage). They domesticated animals, harvested various crops such as barley, cotton and sesame and had trade with cultures as far away as Mesopotamia.

Archaeological remains include a seal showing a seated human figure with legs in the Yoga position (considered a prototype of the Saiva God Siva) and a trident head piece over a frontal human face flanked by two side faces (possibly signifying the Trimurthy - Lord Siva's three forms, Brahma, Vishnu and Rudran representing the three cosmic activities of creation, preservation and destruction). Images of a mother goddess and many lingas (See Chapter 3) have also been found.

With the Aryan invasion, the Vedic religion (explained in the next chapter) began to play a big part in the Saiva religion and conversely a lot of Saiva religious ideas were taken up by the Aryan religion. Non-vegetarian Aryans accepted non-killing of animals as part of their religion and stopped performance of animal sacrifices. Philosophical ideas of the Aryans were also totally different from

that of the Dravidians and they took many of these ideas up in due course (See Chapter 2).

The Dravidians did not meet around the sacrificial fire. They not only considered Siva as the supreme God but also used devotion (*bhakti*) as the main mode of achieving salvation (*mukthi*). They used idol worship as a way of communicating with their God, as a way of expressing their love and devotion to God. They had temples for collective prayers. Idols (deities) were ritually installed in these temples according to the *agamas* (See Chapters 3 and 7 for more on these).

In present day, temple worship plays a very important role in the *bhakti* movement; however, the building of temples and the temple rituals are carried out as prescribed in the Sanskrit agamas (today many consider that the agamas were probably written in Tamil first and later translated to the common religious language of the day, Sanskrit). Saivism also owes a massive debt to the Sanskrit Puranas and Epics (See Chapter 4), which again play a major role in our daily lives.

Both groups practised their own religions and coexisted for several centuries before integration of their religious beliefs and way of life took place and eventually became the one complex religion that we refer to as Hinduism today. Many Vedic rituals such as growing sacred fire and the chanting of Vedic hymns are still practised in Saiva temples. Rituals such as *pujas* and *abishekam* are done according to the agamic tradition for prosperity, wealth and general well being. The only difference is that the sacrificial rites are no longer practised.

This Indus valley civilization completely disappeared around 1700 BC possibly due to increased aridity of the soil. With the arrival of Aryans into India and the disappearance of their civilization, the Dravidians may have been pushed down into south India.

"Veda forms the earliest human thoughts where roots of many Indian religions, including Saivism, are seen. Many Vedic views are inconsistent and contradictory, and not acceptable to Saivism. However agama is relatively more precise and forms the bedrock of

rituals and philosophy of Saivism"Dr.K.Ganesalingam [1]

The twelve *Thirumurai* and fourteen *Meikanda Sastras* (along with the Saiva agamas) are considered by Saivism to be religious canon (See Chapter 4). The former are the collection of hymns in praise of Lord Siva while the latter contain the philosophy of the Saiva religion. They were both written in Tamil between the seventh and thirteenth centuries AD.

In spite of many attempts in recent years to change the Sanskrit mantras, invocations, prayers and rituals in temples to Tamil, it has not been taken up in a big way, and is only practised in a small number of temples. All the religious rituals are still practised in Sanskrit by the Brahmins (priests).

God exists in the form of sound ("Osai Oli elaam Aanai Neeyee"- Thirunavukkarasar). When chanting mantras (whether in Tamil or in Sanskrit) they are only beneficial if chanted in that particular language. Translating mantras from one language to another is not recommended as the mantras lose potency and don't produce the same energy as in their original language. If we want to continue chanting Sanskrit mantras, then we should at least know the meaning of those mantras before we chant them. In fact, as Tamils, we should be using the Panniru Thirumurai hymns (which are in Tamil) for these pujas and abhisekams.

A true Saivite will always refrain from doing immoral acts. The true devotees of Siva avoid drinking liquor, speaking lies, lust, stealing and killing. They are called the five major sins (*panchama paathagankal* in Tamil).

One should know that abstinence from meat eating is one of the disciplines of a true Saivite. The term 'Saivan' has come to mean one who abstains from meat eating, i.e., a vegetarian.

Saivites are required to follow certain observances daily. Every Saivite should apply holy ash on his/her forehead before their prayers in the mornings and evenings. It is important to say 'Siva Siva' while applying the holy ash. After this, Saivites should begin to chant the holy hymns Thevaram and Thiruvasakam (See Chapter 6 for more on the conduct of Saivites).

The next in importance to a Saivite is the *Panchadchara* mantra, which literally means five letters. These five letters are: *Na, ma, si, va, ya*. Siva is called by thousands of names, but *Namasivaya* is the most appropriate name for Him. Repetition (“***Aum Namasivaya***”) is called *japam* and contemplation is called *dhyanam* (See Chapter 6 for more on Namasivaya).

The *Philosophy of Saivism* is discussed in chapter 8 under the heading of Saiva Siddhanta - The Philosophy of Saivism.

CHAPTER 2: HINDUISM

Hinduism is not a religion by itself but a common name used to include many Indian religions, including Saivism. Present day Hinduism originated and evolved from the Vedic religion (also known as Vedism – the religion that was presented in the Vedas).

The word "Hindu" came into existence because of a mispronunciation of the Sanskrit word "Sindhu" (the name of a river) by Persians some 3000 years ago. They could not pronounce the letter "S" correctly, instead pronouncing it as "H"; thus Sindhu" became "Hindu". The word "Hindu" therefore was originally meant to define a group of people who lived on this side of the Sindhu River and not those practising a particular religion. This word therefore covered people of every religious denomination who lived there. In the 18th and 19th centuries when India was part of the British Empire, the English started referring to all non-Muslims as "Hindus".

It is generally believed that the Vedic period started with the arrival of Aryans in north India around 1800 BC - 1500 BC. Aryans were originally from the area between the Caspian Sea and Hindu Kush mountains and migrated into India from the North West. They were nomads and warriors who had horse drawn chariots and superior weapons. Sanskrit was their language and they practised a religion that was presented in the *Rig Veda.* Vedic texts were written in Sanskrit, and of the four, the Rig Veda is the most important one. The Vedas are the foundation of Hinduism.

"Rig Veda is considered to be the oldest of the four Vedas. It mentions Siva only in four or five of its hymns and Vishnu in six or seven but did not consider them as their supreme deity"- Prof. A.S. Gnanasambanthan[2]

Aryans worshipped the forces of nature like the Sun, the Moon, Fire (Agni), Storms (Indra) and the Sea (Varuna) as their deities. Their ritual was referred to as Yajna which involved growing a ritual fire (also called Homam) and performance of animal sacrifice.

They believed that the performance of these rituals brought them everything that they needed in this world as well as assuring them of a place in heaven.

Aryans were non-vegetarians. For them, killing a cow or a horse was acceptable as seen in the performance of the Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice) which was one of the most important royal rituals of the Vedic period. Kings conducted Ashvamedha for the acquisition of power and glory as well as for the prosperity of their kingdoms. This ritual appears in both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata.*

When they entered India the Aryans encountered a civilization on the banks of the Indus River that archaeologists date back as far as 3000 BC. The inhabitants spoke a different language (a proto-Dravidian language) and worshipped deities such as Siva and Sakthi (many of these images were found at archaeological sites such as Mohenjo Daro and Harappa).

Their philosophy was totally different from that of the Aryan philosophy. The non-Aryan people did not use a sacrificial fire nor did they perform animal sacrifices. They believed in the cycle of birth and death, karma and reincarnation. They worshipped idols and had temples for collective prayers. They were familiar with Yoga and meditation. They used devotion (bhakti) as the main mode of achieving salvation (mukthi).

These two cultures and their systems of thought began to mix by the beginning of the first millennium BC, around the time of the Upanishads (which concentrate on Hindu philosophy and spiritual insight - See below). The non-Aryans accepted the Vedas as part of their religious canon. Vedic sacrifices were gradually replaced by pujas, abishekams and image worship which came from the Dravidians. Aryans started to accept non-violence (ahimsa) as part of their religious philosophy. The 'way of devotion' (bhakti) became the main aspect of the religious practice.

"Indigenous Saiva religion reshaped the Aryan Vedic religion of worship of Gods of natural forces like Varuna and Indra into a highly philosophical system of what is today commonly called in the west "Hinduism"

Dr. Alexksandar Ignijatovic [3]

"The Vedic period is believed to have ended around 500 BC. The Vedic religion however mingled with more advanced indigenous religion (Saivism) and gradually metamorphosed and evolved into present day Hinduism."

K.A. Nilakanta Sastry in his book 'Development of Religion in South India' discusses the fusion of Aryan with non-Aryan cults, which became the present day Hinduism [4]

"For some time, the word "Hinduism" was used in a restricted form only to refer to Vedic religion or Brahmanism. (The Vedic God was referred to as Brahman and hence the religion was also referred to as Brahmanism).Today, Hinduism includes all religions which consider Vedas and agamas as their authorities. Many people do not know that today there are many independent religions within Hinduism such as Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktham. They do share some common features that are central to Hinduism. Hinduism has been enriched by the diversity they provide and saved over these centuries by the complexity and richness they have imputed to it through their integration."

Jeyram V [5]

To this end, even today a Homam (fire) is performed as a part of religious practice. However, the items thrown into the ahuti (fire) are not animal flesh; instead, wood, coconuts and large quantities of ghee are used.

The majority of sacred texts were composed in Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans. Sanskrit continues to be used in religious and literary settings. The Hindu scriptures can be divided into two classes: *Shruti* and *Smriti*. These are the two authoritative sources of Hinduism. Shruti literally means "what is heard" and Smriti means "what is remembered". Shruti is revelation (by God)and Smriti is tradition (revealed by great Sages of Hinduism). Shruti includes the Vedas and the Upanishads. The religious texts other than Shruti are collectively referred to as Smriti. The most notable of the Smriti are the Puranas and Ithihasas (epics) (See below).

The term *Veda* (meaning "knowledge" in Sanskrit) is used to refer to a compilation of four ancient sacred texts, which form the primary canon of Hinduism. The Vedas contain hymns, incantations and detailed rituals of the Vedic religion. Vedic texts are traditionally categorised into four groups: *Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.*

Rig Veda means the Veda of Adoration and contains verses adoring deities. It is the oldest of the four Vedas. It contains 1028 hymns that are to be recited by a chief priest during the performance of animal sacrifice in an open fire.

The *Yajur Veda* has two branches, Krishna Yajur and Shukla Yajur; both contain the mantras and incantations for rituals, but the latter contains the explanations for these rituals as well.

The *Sama Veda* (Sama means melodies) consists of a selection of poetry mainly from the Rig Veda. As they are from Rig Veda, they are songs of adoration addressed to different Gods that are to be sung in specifically indicated melodies. (This could well be the predecessor for singing Thirumurai in melodies).

The *Atharva Veda* contains chants and spells intended mainly to control sickness and diseases. It incorporates healing, magic and charms to cure diseases and possession by demons.

Each of these four Vedas contains four parts namely *Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.*

The *Samhitas* are collections of hymns, mantras and chants (the basic mantra texts of Vedas). The *Brahmanas* discuss the technical aspects of the rituals as well as comment on their meaning and many connected themes. The Brahmanas are primarily concerned with the proper performance of rituals. The *Aranyakas* (meaning the "forest books") are revelations by ascetics living in the wilderness. They discuss the philosophical and mystical interpretations of the themes presented in the Vedas.

The last section of each of the Vedas is called *Upanishads* or *Vedanta* (literally meaning "end of Veda"). Upanishads are the fundamental texts of Hinduism and concentrate on Hindu philosophy

and spiritual insight. The term Upanishad means 'sitting down near', as in sitting down near a teacher to learn this mystic teaching.

The *Puranas* illustrate Vedic ideas through vivid stories dealing with interactions between deities, Devas, Asuras and humans. Devas are minor deities (celestial beings or godly persons) somewhat like angels in Christianity. They are also mortals living on a higher realm as rewards for their previous good deeds, but still subject to rebirth. Asuras are also called demons. They oppose the Devas and are usually engaged in war with them.

There are a total of eighteen major Puranas, all written largely in verse by Sage Vyasa. There are also eighteen Upapuranas or subsidiary puranas, which were composed after the major ones (See Chapter 4).

Ithihasas consist of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These are the two great epics of India. An integral part of the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad Gita, which contains a discourse between Lord Krishna (Arjuna's charioteer) and the Pandava prince Arjuna on the battlefield before the start of a great battle (See Chapter 4 for more on Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita).

Another important set of scriptures is the *Agamas*, dedicated to rituals, yoga, temple construction and worship. The agamas are divided into three sections: Saiva, Vaishnava and Sakta. These are treatises explaining the external worship of God, such as in idols and temples. The Saiva agamas glorify God as Siva and have given rise to a philosophy known as Saiva Siddhanta. Many believe that the Saiva agamas were revealed by Lord Siva in the Mahendra Mountains of South India, in Tamil, and later translated into Sanskrit, the popular language of that day. ("Mannumamalai Mahendramathanil sonna agamam thoottuvitharuliyum"-Thiruvasakam).

The word Hinduism has now become a common name which denotes all the Vedic religions of India. It is not a religion by itself. There are certain features that are shared by all of Hinduism including *Dharma* (ethics and duties), the Law of *Karma*, *reincarnation* and the attainment of Moksha/Liberation as the highest goal of human struggle.

CHAPTER 3: THE SYMBOLISM OF SAIVA GODS

It was Swami Vivekananda who said that: "By our present constitution we are limited and bound to see God as man. If, for instance, the buffaloes want to worship God, they will, in keeping with their own nature, see Him as a huge buffalo; if a fish wants to worship God, it will have to form an idea of Him as a big fish" (7).

What is *Polytheism?* Breaking the word down, "poly" comes from the Greek word for "many" and "theism" from the Greek word for "God", thus polytheism means a belief in or worship of many gods. Contrary to popular belief, Saivites are not polytheists. Saivism speaks of one God; the different gods and goddesses are mere representations of the powers and functions of the one supreme God.

Saivites hold the view that Siva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer. For this, Lord Siva assumes appropriate names and forms, and also stands transcending all these.

Generally people talk of three functions of Lord Siva (creation, preservation and destruction). In fact he manifests himself in five forms to perform the five-fold activities of creation, preservation, destruction, concealment (giving rest) and blessing (liberation or moksha). When we talk of three functions of Lord Siva the concealment is included in preservation and destruction includes liberation. These five forms are Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheswara and Sadasiva respectively. They are not five independent deities. They represent the same power (Siva) but in five different aspects. Just as a man may be called a doctor, father or husband based upon the tasks he performs, Siva is referred to in the five different forms when performing the five different cosmic dances. (See "*The Portrait of Siva in the pose of Cosmic Dancer - Natarajah*" below.) The same applies to other deities of the Saiva pantheon as well.

Siva as the supreme God is formless, omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing) and omnipresent (in all places at all times). It is not possible to give a definition or a description of something

that is beyond perception. He is to be found everywhere and in everything. ("*Oru naamam ooruruvam onrum illaarkku aayiram thirunaamam paadi naam thelleenam koddoomoo*" - meaning, "To Him, Who does not have name or form, A thousand sacred names sing we, and beat thellenam! (a type of drum used by young girls during singing)" - Thiruvasakam).

Sri-la-Sri Arumuga Navalar (born in Nallur, Jaffna, a nineteenth century defender and revivalist of Saivism and Saiva traditions in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu) in his book, Saiva Vina Vidai, describes the eight attributes of Siva, as described in Saiva agamas:

"He is eternal, omnipresent, beginninglesslytaintless, omniscient, doer of everything, infinite grace, always blissful and independent"

Sri-la-Sri Arumuga Navalar [6]

Lord Siva has two states: the "*sorupa state*" and the "*thadaththa state*". In the "sorupa state" he is in his true state and he is referred to as Sorupa Sivan or Parama Sivan. In this state he exceeds the power of human comprehension by mind, speech and body (manam, vakku and kayam). In the "thadaththa state" he becomes amenable to the souls and takes three types of forms for their benefit. In this stage he gets names, possesses qualities and is accessible to souls. Thus he becomes 'God' to whom we can communicate and express our love and devotion.

Lord Siva, in the "thadaththa state", takes three types of bodies or forms. In His inherent form he is formless, called the *arupa state.* He takes many forms, out of compassion, for the benefit of the souls, called the *rupa* state. In between these two states is the 'formless-form' called *'arupa rupa'* state. Sivalingam (see below) is neither form nor formless but is a symbol (*'arupa rupa'*). Saivites worship Him in all these three states.

Swami Vivekananda said: "We use an external symbol during worship. This helps to keep the mind fixed on the God to whom we pray. We know that the image is not God. Idols or temples are only the supports, the helps of our spiritual childhood: but on and on we

must progress. We must not stop anywhere. 'External worship, material worship', say the books, 'is the lower stage: struggling to rise higher, mental prayer is the next stage, but the highest stage is when the Lord has been realized. The images are simply symbols. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it was wrong. Nor is it compulsory in Saivism"[7]

Therefore, the Saivite's worshipping many Gods and Goddesses is not a mere superstitious idolatry but an act of faith and a form of communication with God.

Let us now look at some of the common Symbols of Saiva Gods:

Lord Siva

Lord Siva is usually shown sitting in a yogic posture against the background of a snow- capped mountain, with his eyes half closed, deep in meditation. His long matted hair is normally tied into a knot. His body is usually smeared with holy ash. On his head he bears the crescent moon and the river Ganga flowing from it. He has three eyes: the third eye rests between his eyebrows. There is a blue mark on his neck. There are two earrings in his ears, one on the right ear is of the type worn by men and the left one is of the type worn by women. This symbolises the Sivam and Sakthi (male and female) principle of five fold activities called Panchakritya (See Natarajah below for further explanation).

A trident (also referred to as trisula - three pronged weapon) often with a small drum (called udukkai in Tamil) attached to it is by his side. He is dressed in tiger skin and has a cobra snake curled around his neck three times.

Rishaba, also called Nandi, the sacred bull, is his divine vehicle. It symbolizes *aram* or *dharma* (divine virtue). Lord Siva's use of this vehicle conveys the idea that he bestows his grace impartially to every soul for its liberation.

(You may also note that all Saiva deities have animals (and birds) as their vehicles, signifying divine powers controlling animal tendencies).

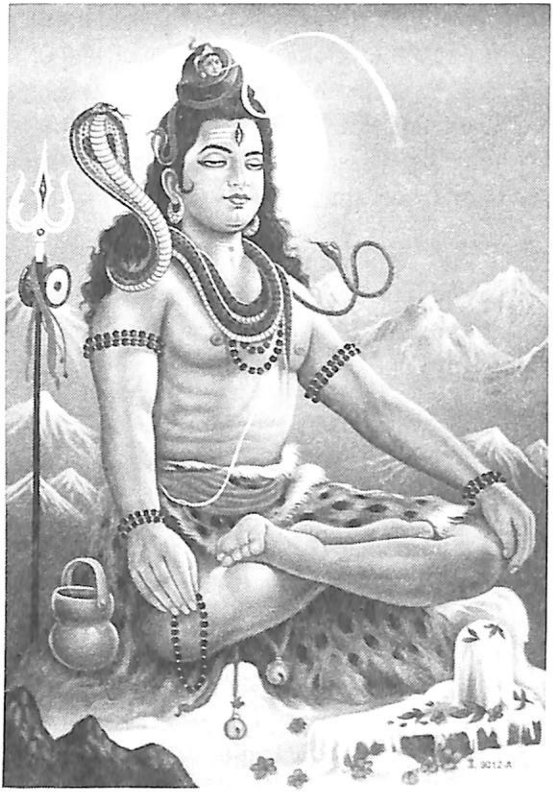


Fig.1. Lord Siva

The trident represents the three qualities (called gunas in Tamil), namely sattva, rajas and tamas (explained in Chapter 8). The trident also symbolizes three functions of the triad - creation, sustenance and destruction. The trident in the hand of Siva indicates that all the three aspects are in his control.

The drum symbolizes the primordial vibrating sound of *creation*. This is explained under 'Natarajah' below.

The snow-white mountain (mount Kailash) represents absolute purity of mind. The posture of yogi in the state of meditation is symbolic of the final gateway to self-realisation. The three eyes represent sun, moon and fire. The third eye in the centre of the forehead symbolizes spiritual knowledge and power and is thus called the eye of wisdom. Like fire it can also destroy evil. In mythology, his third eye burnt the lord of desire (Kama) to ashes.

The River Ganga (Ganges River) flowing from his lock of hair is explained mythologically (See Chapter 10 - 4). The crescent moon on his head signifies the waxing and waning phenomenon of the moon symbolising the time cycle through which creation evolves from the beginning to the end. The blue mark on his neck also has a mythological meaning (See Chapter 10 - 3). The serpent around his neck represents Kundalini Shakti or the spiritual force (See Chapter 9).

Siva smears his body with crematorium ashes pointing to the philosophy of life and death and the fact that death is the ultimate reality of life. The tiger skin that he wears symbolises victory over every force. Tigers also represent lust. Thus sitting on a Tiger skin, Siva indicates that he has conquered lust.

Sivalingam

The Sivalingam also represents Siva. This is a 'formless- form' called the arupa-rupa state. The word Lingam in Sanskrit means sign or mark. Therefore, Sivalingam means symbol of Lord Siva. Many scholars connect the origin of the use of this symbol, for worship, to the early Indus valley civilization, sometime between 3300 and 1300 BC, but it probably existed long before this time. The Dravidians originated the Sivalingam as a symbol of the Supreme Reality - Siva

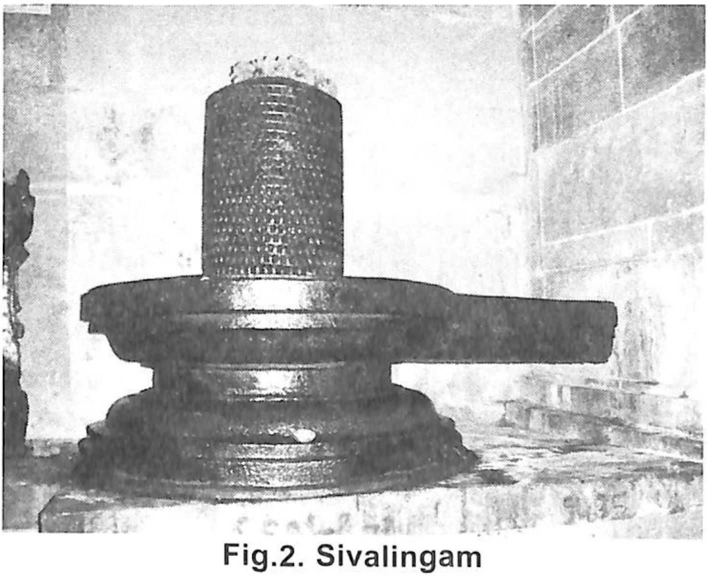


Fig.2. Sivalingam

(in arupa-rupa state).

A Sivalingam consists of three parts, the lowest of which is the Brahma-Pitha, the middle part the Vishnu-Pitha and the uppermost part the Siva-Pitha. It is usually depicted as an elliptical mound, with three horizontal stripes on it, standing on a circular base. It is usually made of stone but can be of any material. In the epic story Ramayana, Lord Rama is said to have worshiped a Sivalingam made of sand at Rameswaram, to rid himself of the sin of killing the demon king Ravana, who was of Brahmin origin.

Another unfortunate yet interesting reference to the Sivalingam is that it represents the phallus or the male reproductive organ and the base of the Lingam corresponds to the female reproductive organ; therefore Sivalingam is interpreted as a representation of symbol of creation. The worship of Sivalingam is therefore thought of as a primitive form of worship. In fact the adaptation of this form of worship is anything but primitive. It shows the genius of our ancient rishis and sages who originated this form of worship as the Symbol of the Supreme, which is neither manifested nor formless!

Sivalingam is elliptical in shape and stands on a circular base. A circle has no beginning or end and neither does our God (Lord Siva). The elliptical shape (lingam) represents the universe, which is elliptical in shape, as are the planetary orbits. Even the electrons of an atom move around the central nucleus in an elliptical fashion.

So, are we worshipping a primitive phallus? Or are we so advanced in our thinking (ahead of our time by thousands of years) that its significance is not understood by outside observers? I will leave that for you to decide.

Natarajah - Siva as the Cosmic Dancer

Natarajah means "The King of Dancers". The significance of the Natarajah is said to be that Siva is shown as the source of all movement within the cosmos represented by the arch of flames. Everything that we see in the universe is movement. Every atom is performing this movement (dance). The cosmic dance by Natarajah is performed at Chidambaram in south India. (This particular dance

is called 'Ananda Tandava' - dance performed with joy. There are at least seven types of tandava).

For Saivites, Chidambaram is the most important Saiva temple and when people refer to "Koil" (temple) the word denotes the temple at Chidambaram. Chidambaram is one of the five holiest Saiva temples in India, each representing one of five elements.

(Siva also exists as a manifestation of earth at Kanchipuram, as fire at Thiruvannamalai, as water at Thiruvanaikkaval and as air at Kalahasti. These five temples are referred to as Panchabootha sthalas (pancha means five, 'bootha' means the elements earth, fire, water, wind and space and sthalas means temples).

Chidambaram is unique in that a bronze Natarajah image is



Fig.3. Natarajah

worshipped in the innermost sanctum (*garbhagriha)* of the temple (usually the immovable image of the presiding deity in the garbhagriha is made of black stone in the form of a *Linga* - See Chapter 7).

The gestures of the dance represent Lord Siva's five fold activities *(Panchakritya).* He is dancing in a circle of flames, lifting his left leg and balancing over a demon or dwarf with his four arms delicately poised.

The upper right hand holds the drum (called udukkai in Tamil), which symbolizes the primordial vibrating sound of *creation.* (This is also consistent with the '*Big Bang Theory*' of creation. The 'Big Bang Theory' is the dominant scientific theory about the origin of the universe. According to this theory the universe was created sometime about 15 billion years ago from a cosmic explosion that hurled matter in all directions).

The upper left hand contains *Agni* or the fire that signifies *destruction.* Thus, in the four hands, the upper right and the upper left symbolize the balance of creation and destruction. The continuous chain of creation and destruction maintains the universe.

The lower hands in *abhaya* and *varadamudras* (mudras are a non-verbal mode of communication and self expression) show the offering of protection and salvation.

The right hand, raised with open palm is referred to as a*bhaya mudra* (meaning '*fear not*' in Sanskrit) bestowing *protection* (preservation).

The left hand pointed towards the raised left foot, *vezhamudra* (in appearance like the trunk of an elephant) signifies upliftment and bestowal of grace or *Salvation* to the devotee. It instructs the devotee to take refuge and surrender at the feet of the Lord Siva. (Saivism does not accept the view of the soul uniting with the 'Brahman' at liberation. We believe that the soul attains mukthi, and will live at the feet of Lord Siva in perpetual bliss).

The right foot (*Unriya thiruvadi* in Tamil, meaning 'the placed foot') standing on a dwarf indicates *concealment* (giving rest).The dwarf is the demon Muyalagan (the evil personified and dwarfed by

the Lord Natarajah) that symbolises the ego and ignorance, which is defeated by the dance of Siva. Thus the worshipper is freed of the concealed evil of these two. The raised left foot called *Kunchita-pada* (*Kunchita* – means raised. *Tookiya thiruvadi* in Tamil) indicates *enlightenment* or *Salvation* of the devotee (mukthi).

The surrounding halo of flames (called thiruvasi in Tamil) represents the manifest universe and the cycle of births.The snake round his waist is Kundalini, the life force that is situated at the base of the spine in the form of a coiled serpent (See Chapter 9).

The vibrant nature of the dance is indicated by Siva's matted hair (jata) flying on both sides of the head in waves one above the other and the cloth around his waist flying in the air. If he ever stops dancing the universe will cease to exist.

Thus the gestures of the dance represent Siva's five activities, *creation* (symbolized by the drum), *protection* (by the "fear not" hand gesture), *destruction* (by the fire), *embodiment* (by the foot planted on the ground), and *release* (by the foot held aloft).

Arthanaareeswarar



(Artha in Sanskrit means half and naari means woman) This is another form of Lord Siva and Parvathi (Uma) present together as half male and half female. The male half appears as wearing the skin of a tiger and snakes, having matted hair with moon, holding trisula and drum, standing with a bent leg, embracing the bull on the right side and the female half appears with well-plaited hair, wearing silk and gold ornaments, and holding a flower in her hand. Of the two earrings, one on the right ear is of the type worn by men and the left one is of the type worn by women. This combined male and female concept is created to demonstrate that Siva and Shakthi are one and the same Supreme.

Parvathi

Parvathi is Lord Siva's consort and she represents his Sakthi



Fig.4. Siva-Parvathi

(power or energy). In her serene aspect, she is depicted as Uma or Parvathi and is usually seen along with Siva and also their children, Lord Ganesha and Lord Muruga.

She is seen with only two hands; the right hand shows *Abhaya mudra* (*fear not* in Sanskrit) bestowing *protection* from both evil and ignorance. The Goddess Parvathi (being born the daughter of a Himavant, lord of the mountains) is worshipped in several Indian religions by several other names such as Adhiparashakthi (supreme Goddess), Ambikai (mother), Gauri (young, unmarried Parvathi), Maheswari (Lord Siva's energy), Annapurani (provider of annam - meals), Rajarajeswari (mother Goddess and protector), Bhuvaneswari (mistress of the World), and Dakshayani (as daughter of Dakshan).

Parvathi is generally considered as a benign Goddess. In her terrifying aspects, the most commonly worshipped forms are Durga and Kali. These are forms taken by the Goddess in an effort to destroy evil, and hence, these forms need not invoke fear, for she is the mother who has risen in anger only to destroy evil forces and provide eternal happiness and peace.

Durga (Goddess of courage) is depicted as a warrior woman riding a lion or a tiger with multiple hands carrying weapons.

Ganesha - The God with Elephant Head

Ganesha is one of the most well-known and venerated representations of God. He is described as having a human form with an elephant's head. Ganesha means 'the lord of all beings'. He is the first son of Lord Siva and his consort Parvathi. Some of his many



Fig.5. Lord Ganesha

names are: Vinayaka (supreme leader), Vigneshwara (remover of all obstacles), Ganapathi (Leader of Ganas - Lord Siva's forces), Gayanana (elephant faced), Ingkara (Five handed), Lambodara ("Pot Belly") and Ahnaimugan (elephant faced).

Vinayaka is invoked at the beginning of all ritualistic worship, as Vigneshwara is the destroyer of all obstacles. Vinayaka worship is very simple; we do not even need a statue or a picture. Vinayaka can be made out of cow dung, wet turmeric powder or sandal wood paste made in the shape of a cone and with a few sticks of grass (arukampul which has a long life) placed on top of the cone. The same arukampul is even enough as an offering.

He is also worshipped as the god of education, knowledge, wisdom and wealth. Every element of the body of Ganesha has its own value and its own significance. Ganesha's vehicle is a mouse, which represents the subjugated demon of vanity and impertinence.

One hand holds modaka (sweet) representing the joyous rewards of spiritual seeking.The second hand waving a hatchet cuts away the bondage of desires. The third hand, turned towards the devotee, is in a pose of blessing, refuge and protection (*abhaya*) and the fourth hand with broken tusk that Ganesha holds like a pen is a symbol of sacrifice, which he broke for writing the Mahabharata for Sage Vyasa.

Another explanation for his four arms is that they represent the four inner faculties of the subtle body - mind (manam), intellect (buddhi), conditioned consciousness (chittam) and ego (ahamkaram) referred to as anthakaranas (See Chapter 8 for more on this). His potbelly contains infinite universes.

Many stories describe how Ganesha came to have an elephant head. One tells how Parvathi created Ganesha in the absence of Siva to guard her quarters. When Siva wanted to see her, Ganesha forbade it, at which point Siva cut off his head. Later Siva restored Ganesha to life and provided him with the head of an elephant, because no other was available.

There was an asura called Gajamugasura who became extremely powerful. He put the Devas and rishis to great trouble. At the request of the Devas, Lord Siva sent Lord Ganesha to overcome Gajamugasura. He broke off his right tusk and used it to kill

him as he had been granted the boon that he be destroyed by no weapon. Gajamugasura rushed at Ganesha in the form of a mouse. He crushed the ego and vanity of Gajamugasura and sat on the mouse. The humbled Gajamugasura bowed before Ganesha, who accepted the mouse as his vahana (vehicle).

Ganesha represents the first sound, AUM, from which all hymns were born. When Shakthi (Energy) and Siva (Matter) met, both Sound (Ganesha) and Light (Skanda - Subramaniya) were born.

Lord Subramanya

Subramanya is the second son of Lord Siva. He is also referred to as Saravanabhava, Muruga (handsome), Skanda, Kadamba, Kartikeya, Arumuga, Shanmukha (because he has six faces) and Guha.



Fig.6. Lord Subramanya

He carries a spear (Vel) in his hand and rides a peacock. The peacock grips a snake with its claws. The Vel, described as Gnana Shakthi (Gnanam - Knowledge) signifies destruction of ignorance and granting of knowledge.

Muruga also has two consorts namely Valli and Theivayanai, signifying Icha Shakthi and Kiriya Shakthi. *Icha Shakthi* is will and *Kriya Shakthi* is action.

The peacock, the vehicle of Subramanya signifies vanity. The peacock is the enemy of the serpent. It is seen clutching the serpent. The serpent, which symbolises anavam the sauce of ego and other evil qualities, is not killed but held in captivity. This symbolises complete control of anavam.

According to one story, Soorapadma, an asura, did deep penance and worshipped Lord Siva, who granted him several boons (one of which was that he could not be killed by any deities or mortals except by Lord Siva Himself or His Shakti). He believed that Lord Siva had given him immortality and so he ravaged the earth and tormented its beings.

Subramanya was created out of the six sparks from the central eye of Lord Siva for the special purpose of killing Soorapadma and his clan. The sparks were so fierce even Agni could not bear them; this fire was then transported by the river Ganga into the Saravana forest, where Subramanya was born in the form of six babies (six sparks became six babies). Six Kartika damsels raised them. Parvati combined these six babies into one with six faces - Shanmukha. He led the army of the Devas to victory against Soorapadma.

Lord Vishnu

Lord Vishnu finds place in Saivism and Vaishnavism, but the concepts are different. He is the preserver of the Triad (namely Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra) in Saivism. In Vishnu temples, he is often represented resting on the coiled serpent Shesha (who represents the sleeping universe – in puranas it is described that Shesha was the first snake and that when he uncoils creation takes place and when he coils back, the universe ceases to exist) with his consort Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) massaging his feet. His vehicle is the swift-flying bird Garuda.

He has four arms: According to Vaishnavism, the first one holds a conch shell (sangu) indicating the sound (ohm) from which the universe was born; one holds a discus (chakra) reminding us the necessity of destroying one's ego as well as the reminder of the wheel



Fig.7. Lord Vishnu

of time; one hand raised with open palm (a*bhaya mudra* meaning '*fear not'*) bestowing protection; the fourth one holds a mace (gadai) indicating power and punishment as part of his role as preserver.

Most of the time, good and evil forces are evenly matched in the world. But at times, the balance is destroyed and evil gets the upper hand. Vishnu incarnates periodically for the establishment and protection of righteousness and destruction of evil. These incarnations are called avatars (meaning 'coming down').

Vishnu has descended in nine avatars already and will appear at the end of this Yuga (KaliYuga, See Chapter 10) as Kalki, his tenth avatar.

God taking avatar is not in Saivism. He does not experience birth or death. Lord Siva manifests himself as Vishnu and performs the act of preservation. This Vishnu is different from the Vishnu in Vaishnavism.

Lord Brahma

Brahma is the creator among the Triad. Brahma has four heads (said to represent the four Vedas) and four arms. Unlike all other Gods in the Saiva religion, Brahma carries no weapons in his hands. In one of his hands, he holds a kamandala (water-pot) which is a symbol of sanyasin - a man of renunciation. One hand holds a string of rosary beads which denotes the importance of chanting mantras



Fig.8. Lord Brahma

and meditating. Meditation is the final gate way to Realization. In his third hand he is holding the Vedas that signify knowledge. His fourth hand holds a lotus flower. Sometimes the fourth hand is depicted holding a sceptre, which is associated with the pouring of ghee into a sacrificial pyre - indicating the fact that Brahma is the lord of sacrifices.

The story behind the lack of worship of Brahma relates back to an argument between Vishnu and Brahma over who was the greatest between them (See Chapter 10-2).

Lakshmi - Goddess of Wealth

Lakshmi is the consort of Lord Vishnu. When the Devas and



Fig.9. Goddess Lakshmi

Asuras churned the ocean of milk (See Chapter 10 -3) many things appeared including Lakshmi.

Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. Lakshmi is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Lakshya' meaning 'goal' or 'aim', therefore representing the goal of life, wealth and prosperity.

She is usually represented as a fair lady with four arms, seated on a red lotus, dressed in red garments and precious jewels. The meaning of the lotus in relation to Lakshmi refers to purity and spiritual power. Her palm is always extended to bless people. She has golden coins falling on the ground from the front right hand illustrating that she is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is often worshipped to achieve wealth and success.

Saraswathi - Goddess of Knowledge

Saraswathi is the consort of Lord Brahma the creator. She is the goddess of knowledge and all literary arts including music, arts and



Fig.10. Goddess Saraswathi

speech. She is represented as a fair woman dressed in white, sitting on a white lotus (signifying the purity of true knowledge) holding the sacred scriptures in one hand, rosary beads in the other and playing the veena (musical instrument) with her other two hands. The Sacred books represent knowledge. The rosary represents the power of meditation and spirituality and the veena represents her mastery of all arts and sciences.

Saraswathi rides on a white swan (a mythical bird), which is known for its judgment between good and bad. It is said that swan has a unique ability to separate pure milk from a mixture of milk and water. This virtue indicates that one should learn to separate the good from the evil and then accept that which is valuable and discard that which is worthless or evil. Sometimes a peacock is seen beside the goddess. The peacock is for beautyand art form (its dance), and so it is shown by the side of the goddess of all arts.

The goddess Saraswathi is worshipped during Navarathri (meaning nine nights). The last three days of Navarathri are dedicated to her. (The first three days are dedicated to Durga and the second three days to Lakshmi – See Chapter 11).

Minor Deities

They are not manifestations of Higher Gods. These deities are at a lower level than the previous ones. They include Indra, Varuna and Agni. These deities achieved their positions by acquiring extraordinary merits (good karma or punnium). When their karma is used up they have to be re-born again as a human to finish off their karma and work for their liberation.

There are also many numbers of village deities and demi-Gods who are similar to those of lower level deities.

In summary, idol worship is very important in our religion. Idols act as a focus for our prayers. When we pray in front of the deity we never think of it as a piece of stone but as creator of this universe with whom we can communicate. God is one and the external symbols during worship help us during our spiritual "childhood" in our progression to our ultimate salvation (mukthi).

CHAPTER 4: SCRIPTURES OF SAIVISM

Tamil devotional literature and the philosophical texts are known in Sanskrit as Sthothras (and Thoththiram in Tamil) and Sastras (Saththiram in Tamil), respectively. They are comparable to the Vedic Samhitas and the Upanishads (See Chapter 2 for more on the Upanishads). The Sthothras are a collection of hymns in praise of various deities, while the Sastras are explanations of the philosophy of Saiva religion.

The *Scriptures of Saivism* consist of:

1. Twenty-eight Saiva Agamas.
2. Twelve Thirumurai (Thirumurai means sacred book) and
3. Fourteen Meikanda Sastras.

These are considered as the Saiva canon. In addition, there are *Puranas, Thirukkural (see below), Epics*, and works of Saiva saints which are also considered as part of Saiva scriptures. Refer below for details.

1. Twenty-eight Saiva Agamas

Agamas explain the external worship of God in idols and temples. They speak of various aspects of religion, such as temple design, temple building, image making, rituals and temple worship. Agamas do not derive their authority from the Vedas, but are not antagonistic to them either. They are Vedic in spirit and character.

As described earlier, agamas are divided into three sections: the *Saiva,* the *Vaishnava* and the *Sakta*. These three chief sects of Hinduism (Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism) base their doctrines and dogmas on their respective agamas.

Saiva agamas glorify God as Siva and have given rise to the philosophy known as Saiva Siddhanta. In Saivism, there are 28 primary agamas and 207 *upa agamas* or subsidiary agamas. Most of these subsidiary agamas are not in existence now.

Saiva agamas are classified into two sections: 10 Siva bheda (bheda means division) and 18 Rudra bheda agamas. The 10 Siva bheda sections of the agamas are known as the original ones (mulagama) said to have been taught by God himself. The 18 Rudra bheda agamas are said to be composed by rishis (sages to whom the Vedas were originally revealed by God).

Even though *Veda* is accepted as part of the Saiva canon, many Vedic views are inconsistent, contradictory, and therefore not acceptable to Saivism. However, the Vedas form the earliest human thoughts where roots of many Indian religions, including Saivism, are seen.

The Agamas are more precise than the Vedas. Because they prescribe details of temple rituals they are considered very important. In fact, because of this, they are held in higher esteem in Saivism than the Vedas. Saint Thirumoolar, in his Thirumanthiram, says that the Vedas are of general significance and the Agamas are of special significance to Saivism. Saiva Siddhanta philosophy is also referred to as Agamanta (end or conclusion of the agamas - similar to the term Vedanta meaning end or conclusion of the Vedas).

2. Twelve Thirumurai

The 12 Thirumurai in Tamil are referred to as *Panniru Thirumurai* (panniru means 'twelve' and thirumurai means 'holy books') and are the collection of twelve Holy Scriptures, written in praise of Lord Siva, by twenty-seven devotees of the Lord.

The Thirumurai total to 18,316 hymns and are traditionally referred to as the "Tamil Veda".

During the period between 3rd and 6th centuries AD all of the Tamil speaking areas of South India were under the influence of tyrannical occupiers named Kalabhrar (invaders from north) who supported Jainism and Buddhism and suppressed both Tamil and the Saiva faith from being practised.

Between the 6th and 9th century AD, four saints, Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar, Sundaramurthy Nayanar

and Manikkavasakar were born to revive the religion. They were also referred to as Nayanmars, meaning "leaders" (See Chapter 5 for more on this).

These four saints re-ignited the bhakti movement with intense emotional devotion to Siva. These saints, with their followers, travelled the country many times over, singing, dancing, debating (with other religious leaders, mainly Buddhists and Jains) and performing miracles.

The thousands of hymns of the first three Nayanmars are referred to as *Thevarams*, meaning garland for the Lord. They were compiled into the first seven Thirumurai. The hymns of Manikkavasakar called Thiruvasakam became the eighth Thirumurai. Nambi Andar Nambi at the request of the Chola king, Raja Raja Cholan, carried out the compilation of Thirumurai at a later date (eleventh century).

Thiruvasakam (meaning "The Sacred word") is known for its devotional depth, religious insight and spiritual experience and it is acknowledged as the most moving devotional poem in Tamil literature. Reverend G.U. Pope translated it into English. Thirukkovaiyar, on the other hand, is a 'love song' where the devotee considers himself as the woman and Lord Siva as the man.

The ninth and eleventh Thirumurai are the hymns of some earlier and later saints. The tenth Thirumurai by Saint Thirumoolar occupies a unique position in that, though it is classified amongst Saiva hymnal literature, it is really a sastra (saththiram), i.e., philosophical literature. All the other Thirumurai (1-9 and 11) are referred to as sthothras (thoththiram) meaning hymns in praise.

The Thiruthondar Puranam (or Preiya Puranam) by Sekkilar (1133-1150AD) is a landmark in the history of Saivism. This is about the lives of 63 Saiva saints in the form of an epic (kavium poetry).

Sekkilar used Sundaramurthy Nayanar's *Thiruthondatthokai pathikam* (which gives a brief note on each of their great deeds, in one to three lines) as the basis for this epic story. Sekkilar used the same order of the pathikam to describe each of their stories and intertwined it with the story of Sundaramurthy Nayanar whom he portrayed as the hero of this epic.

It is considered one of the masterpieces of Tamil literature and was included as the twelfth Thirumurai (the last one) by the king Kulothungan II.

Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar and Sundaramurthy Nayanar sung these Thevara pathigams (each pathigam contain ten or eleven hymns) while visiting 274 Siva temples. These temples are referred to as "Padal petra Thalangal" meaning those temples that were glorified by Thevarams.

The Vaishnava wing of the movement was represented by twelve Alvars ('divers' into the qualities of God), who did the same as the Saiva saints. Their hymns, numbering 4000, are called Nalayira Divyaprabandham (meaning 4000 sacred hymns) in Tamil.

The number of Hymns (stanzas) in Thevarams alone (first seven Thirumurai) is 8237.

Thiruvasakam: 656, Thirukkovaiyar: 400.

3. Fourteen Meikanda Sastras

They are also referred to as the Saiva Siddhanta Sastras. The Philosophy of Saivism is enshrined in these 14 philosophical treatises known as the Meikanda Sastras.

Hence the Thirumurai are referred to as "books of adulation or praise" (pugal nul in Tamil) and the Meikanda Sastras are referred to as "books of substance or logic" (porul nul in Tamil).

Saint Meikandar of the 13th century codified these philosophical thoughts in his work Sivagnanabodham. This work is considered as the primary text of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. Meikandar wrote only the Sivagnanabodham, while five other scholars contributed the other 13 out of the 14 works in the Meikanda Sastras. (See Chapter 8 for more)

The texts and the authors (six of them) are as follows:

1. Thiruvunthiyar - Thiruviyalur Uyyavantathevanayanar
2. Thirukkalirruppatiyar - Thirukkadavur Uyyavanta Thevanayanar

3. Sivagnanabodham- Meikanda Thevar of Thiruvennainallur
4. Sivagnanasithiyar- Arulnanthi Sivam of Thirutturaiyur
5. Irupa Irupathu- Arulnanthi Sivam of Thirutturaiyur
6. Unmai Vilakkam- Manavacakamkatantar of Thiruvatikai

The following eight are by Umapathysivam

7. Sivapirakasam
8. Thiruvarutpayan
9. Vinavenpa
10. Unmai Neri Vilakkam
11. Porrip Pakrotai
12. Kotikkavi
13. Nencuvitu Tutu
14. Sangattpa Nirakaranam

Meikandar appeared at a time when there was much confusion regarding the philosophy of Hinduism. There were three main views and it was up to Meikandar to explain the Saiva point of view. Meikandar codified the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy in his book Sivagnanabodham. As this is considered the primary text of Saiva Siddhanta, all the other works along with Sivagnanabodham are (collectively) referred to as the Meikanda Sastras.

Other Saiva Hymns

In addition to the 12 Thirumurai mentioned earlier, there are many more Saiva hymns written by devotees of various deities over the period from 12th century to present day. They are not coded into any form but are equally emotional bhakti hymns as Thirumurai, in their own right. Some examples are: Arunagirinathar's *Tiruppukal*, Abirami Bhutter's *Abirami andhathi*, Auvaiyar's *Vinayakar akaval* and hymns on lord Murugan like *Kanthar Anuboothi and Kantha sashti kavasam.*

Puranas

Puranas consist of short stories and narrations (mythology), which give the religious truths to the ordinary people through them. The aim is to impress these on the mind of the people and thereby help them to understand the Hindu religion and its significance.

The Puranas are considered Smriti (meaning "that which is remembered" (oral tradition) in Sanskrit as opposed to "Shruti" meaning "that which is heard" (revelation from God)). There are a total of 18 major Puranas, all written largely in verse. These texts form the last stage of Vedic literature, with verses written in very technical language.

The 18 major Puranas codified by Sage Viyasa (who also codified the Vedas and wrote Mahabharata in Sanskrit), into three groups, each exalting one member of the Saiva Trinity. Of the 18, six Puranas glorify *Siva*, six glorify *Vishnu*, and the last six glorify *Brahma.* Apart from these 18 Puranas, there are also 18 Upapuranas or subsidiary Puranas, which were composed after the major ones.

The original Puranas were written in the language of the people of that time (modern Sanskrit). They were written for ordinary people (not for scholars) who could not understand philosophy nor were able to study the Vedas. They contain the essence of the Vedas. The sages made use of these to illustrate the eternal principles of religion. They tell of the creation of the universe and the human race, narrate the genealogies of kings and saints, and contain assorted narratives, stories, and philosophical and religious topics. All the Puranas have been translated into major Indian languages (including Tamil) as well as English.

Few important puranas of Saivism are Kanthapuranam, Thiruvilaiyadal puranam, Thiruvathavooradikal puranam etc.

The first Governor General of India – C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) said, "Mythology cannot be dispensed with. Philosophy alone or rituals alone or mythology alone is not sufficient. These are the three strands of all ancient religions" [9]

Thirukkural

The book Thirukkural was written by Thiruvalluvar about 2000 years ago. It is a collection of 1330 couplets organized into 133 chapters. This book deals with all aspects of life. It is said that there is nothing that is not available in Thirukkural. It is translated to many languages of the world.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I wanted to learn Tamil, only to enable me to study Valluvar's Thirukkural through his mother tongue itself… There is no one who has given such treasure of wisdom like him".

Dr Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Laureate, said, "There hardly exists in the literature of the world a collection of maxims in which we find such lofty wisdom as in Thirukkural".

Early Tamil books speak of three values of earthly life. They are Aram (Virtue or Ethics), Porul (wealth or matter) and Inbam (pleasure or love). These are the goals of all human beings. It was believed that a person who leads a virtuous life on earth would attain Moksha or Veedu (liberation of the soul).

Thirukkural couplets are arranged in three main sections, as Aram, Porul, Kaamam (Inbam). The section on Aram also speaks of worshipping God and attaining Veedu.

It is generally said that Thirukkural gives the truths of all religions. However, it may be seen that all the views of Thirukkural are not acceptable to all religions. For Saivism, there is no view of Thirukkural that is unacceptable to it. Some of the Saiva Siddhanta books are reflecting some views of Thirukkural. Sri-la-Sri Arumuga Navalar calls Thiruvalluvar as Thiruvalluva Nayanar. All Saivites should learn this great book of Thirukkural.

Epics

The Saiva religion often speaks of 'Aram'. It is difficult to directly translate Aram into English. The closest one could say is that it is righteousness. Another way to describe Aram is "doing what is prescribed in the 'good books' (e.g. Thirukkural) as righteous and

not doing that which is prescribed as not righteous". The opposite of Aram is Pavam.

The epic **Ramayana** explains how Rama conducted himself by following everything that is prescribed as right and not following that which is prescribed as wrong. By doing this he was able to triumph over Ravana.

The epic **Mahabharata**, on the other hand, narrates how Duryodhana and his brothers died in a war with their cousins by observing the opposite. They did everything that was wrong and discarded everything that was right.

Both are Hindu epics. The moral of these epics is that 'Good wins and evil loses' ("Aram vellum; Pavam thotkum").

As these two epics teach Aram or Dharma, which is the major component of any religion, it is beneficial for all to study them. However, as they are not related to Saiva religion, they are not dealt with in detail in this book.

CHAPTER 5: BRIEF LIFE HISTORIES OF THE FOUR NAYANMARS

As explained in Chapter 4: during the 3rd and 6th centuries AD, Tamil speaking areas of south India were under the influence of tyrannical occupiers known as Kalabhrar, from the north. During their reign (described as the 'dark age') Jainism and Buddhism were well established and the Tamil Saiva faith was totally suppressed. In the period between the 6th and 9th century AD, four saints were born to revive Saivism and Tamil. Thirugnanasamabandar, Thirunavukkarasar, Sundaramurthy Nayanar and Manikkavasakar are the four great Nayanmars (leaders).

These four Saints were largely responsible for the re-establishment of Saivism from the domination of Buddhism and Jainism. They were also referred to as *Saiva Samayachariyars* meaning *Four Great Religious Teachers*. The first three are the renowned authors of the collection of devotional songs and lyrics known as the *Thevaram*. By their intense devotion to Lord Siva, they began a preaching crusade against the rival religious sects of the Jains

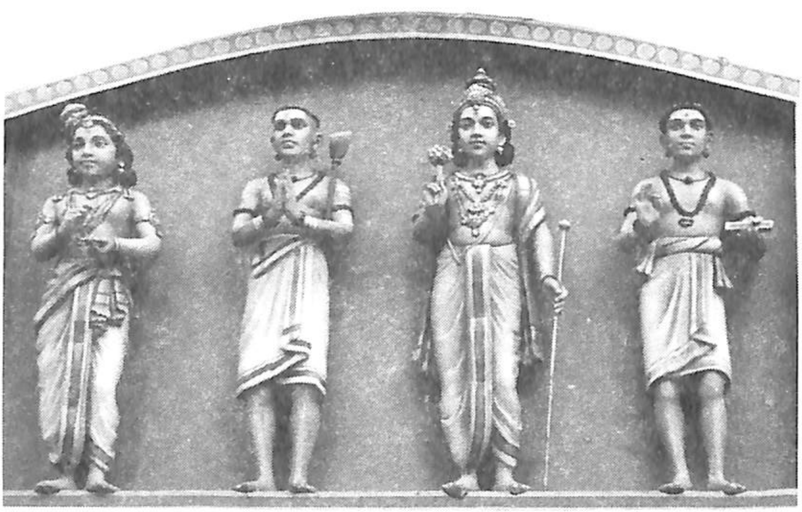


Fig.11. Four Saiva Samayachariyars

and the Buddhists. They denounced their doctrines, and condemned their preaching in public. It was they who restored the religious and linguistic heritage of the Tamils.

Thirugnanasambandar and Thirunavukkarasar were contemporaries, born in the late 6th and early 7th centuries respectively. Suntharamurthy nayanar was born a century later.

Manikkavasakar was the last of the four. He was born in the early ninth century when Jainism was in a great decline but Buddhism was still active. He defeated the Buddhists of Sri Lanka who came with the idea of re-establishing their declining religion in South India at Chidambaram. Most importantly, he gave Saiva Samayam (the Saiva religion) the eighth Thirumurai (See Chapter 4 for more on this), Thiruvasakam and Thirukkovaiyar.

1. Thirugnanasambandar

Thirugnanasambandar (also referred to as Sambandar) was born in the seventh century AD in a town called Sirkali. His parents, a pious Brahmin named Sivapada Hridayar and his wife Bhagavathiyar, prayed to Lord Siva for a son who could re-establish the Saiva religion and Tamil to their former glory.

Lord Siva granted their wish and Sambandar was born to them. One day, when he was three years old, his father took Sambandar to the temple pond prior to his morning puja. His father placed him on the bank and went to bathe.

As the child could not see his father, he looked up towards the temple gopuram and cried "Amme! Appa! (Oh Mother! Oh Father!). Lord Siva and Parvathi appeared before him and consoled him. Lord Siva asked Parvathi to give him some milk. She gave him her milk in a golden chalice mixed with divine wisdom. From that day forwards he was able to sing in praise of Lord Siva.

When his father returned, he saw the milk running out of the corner of the boy's mouth. He took a stick in his hand and questioned the child as to who gave him the milk. He pointed to the temple gopuram (entrance tower) and sang in praise of the Lord. This was his first song (Hymn) starting with "Thodudaiya cheviyan..." and is the first hymn of the Panniru Thirumurai.

After this, Sambandar (still aged only three) set out on pilgrimages with his followers and visited many temples, all over southern India, preaching, singing and working miracles till he came back to his native home from time to time. As he was only three years old, Lord Siva, concerned that his little hands may get hurt by constant clapping, provided him with a pair of golden cymbals at Thirukkolakka temple. When he started these pilgrimages, initially his father used to carry him on his shoulders. Later, Lord Siva provided him with a palanquin (a type of sedan chair) and a pearl umbrella. Devotees carried him on this palanquin thereafter.

Once, on hearing about Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar visited him in his home town of Seerkali. When they met, Sambandar respectfully called Thirunavukkarasar "Appar" (father) since he was his elder. From that day on Thirunavukkarasar is referred to as Appar Swamigal.

They travelled together to various temples and performed miracles in some places. On one occasion, they prayed to Lord Siva to open the doors at the Thirumaraikkadu temple that had been closed shut for one thousand years. After that devotees were able to open and close the doors. On another occasion, during a famine in Tiruveelimilalai, moved by the sufferings of the devotees, they each obtained a gold coin every day from Lord Siva and fed the people till the end of the famine.

During his travels, at the request of Pandya king's wife (Mangayarkarasiar) and his chief minister (Kulacchiraiyar) Sambandar came to Pandya kingdom. The Pandya king and his whole country were converted to Jainism. The king's wife and the chief minister were the only people in the whole of Madurai (capital of the kingdom) who were secretly following Saivism. They could not wear the symbols of Saivism, Thiruneeru and Rudraksha, or meditate on the *Panchadsara* mantra (See Chapter 6 for explanations about these symbols) openly, for fear of the king's wrath.

The Jains set fire to Sambandar's lodge in the night. As the king knowingly colluded with the Jains to set fire to the lodge, Sambandar sang a pathikam (pathikam is a collection of ten or eleven hymns in praise of a deity) requesting to Lord Siva that the fire for which the

king was responsible, should go towards him. Soon the Pandya king started to experience burning all over his body. All the endeavours of the doctors and the Jain priests to alleviate the king's suffering proved futile.

At the request of the queen and the chief minister, the king agreed to their wish to bring Thirugnanasambandar to cure his ailment. Sambandar successfully cured the king's ailment by applying "holy ash" to his body while singing a hymn (called Thiruneetup pathigam). The Jains, having failed to treat the king successfully, wanted to challenge Sambandar to a fire test to prove the superiority of their religion. The test involved both parties writing down the truths of their respective religions on palm leaves (olai - used for writing in ancient times) and putting them in the fire to see which one would survive. The Jain's leaves burnt to ashes but Sambandar's leaves turned green and remained unharmed by the fire. The king declared that the Jains had been defeated.

Having failed the fire test, Jains wanted to try once more (for the third time). This time both parties were to throw their palm leaves in the river Vaigai and the palm leaf which swam against the current would be declared to contain the truth. Sambandar agreed to this and placed the leaf containing the pathigam starting with 'Valka anthanar' (let Brahmins prosper). The leaf went against the flow of water and was retrieved by the chief minister on horse, only after Sambandar ordered the leaf to stop. The leaves put into Vaigai by the Jains went with the flow of the river and washed down to the sea. In the pathigam that Sambandar threw in the Vaikai River there was a phrase 'venthanum onguka' meaning 'let the king get better or thrive'. At that instant Pandya king's hunchback (which he had all his life) disappeared and he was able to stand erect.

Now the king was convinced of the superiority of the Saiva religion and converted back to Saivism. The people followed the example of the king and became Saivites. Saivism was re-established in Madurai. The people of Madurai were now able to wear thiruneeru, and rudraksha openly and able to meditate on Panchadsara mantra (See Chapter 6).

Sambandar carried out many more miracles on his own, such as waking up a man from the dead and raising a girl from her ashes after she was cremated a few years earlier. He also cured a girl affected by a form of continuous fits.

These were carried out partly due to the goodness of his heart to help the grieving devotees and partly as a way of making an impression on the people about the superiority of the Saiva faith (it was easier to convince the ordinary people with miracles than any other forms of teaching. The same happened in Christianity - Jesus carried out many miracles).

At the age of sixteen, after his marriage ceremonies were over (he got married due to pressure by his parents and family), a 'Jyothi' (an effulgent light) appeared at his request from Lord Siva, because Sambandar felt that he had finished the work for which he was sent to this world (giving Saivism and Tamil back their due place) and he did not wish to spend any more time on earth in married life. He, his bride and all those who attended the wedding entered the 'Jyothi' and reached the feet of Siva (mukthi).

Many religions consider that renunciation and asceticism are important for liberation. Even though Sambandar did not want to spend any more time on earth in married life; it was not a hindrance for attaining salvation. This he reiterated in one of his pathigams:

"Mannil-nal lavanam vaala-laam vai-galum
ennil-nal lagathik-ki yaathu-mor kurai-vilai
kannil-nal lathurum kaLu-mala vala-nagar
pennil-nal laalodum perun-thagai irun-thathe"

i.e., if one wishes to attain salvation, there is the flawless path of leading a virtuous life in this world and meditating incessantly on the Great One (Lord Siva) who resides peacefully in the picturesque and prosperous town, Thiruk Kalumalam (Sirkali), with his distinguished associate (Parvathi).

2. Thirunavukkarasar - Appar Swamigal

Thirunavukkarasar was born at Thiruvamoor towards the end of the sixth century AD. His parents were Pukalanar and Mathiniyar

who belonged to the Vellala caste (Farmers). They had two children: the elder, a daughter named Thilakavathiyar, and a son, few years younger, named Marulneekkiyar (remover of illusion).

When the daughter was twelve years old her marriage was arranged by her parents, to Kalipahaiyar, a professional soldier in the Pallava army. Before the wedding however, he was sent by the king to fight a war against a king of the north. He died in the battlefield. During that time, Thilakavathiyar's parents also passed away. As she was betrothed to Kalipahaiyar, she did not want to live without him.

However, her brother Marulneekkiyar said that if she died he would have no one else to care for him and hence he too wanted to die. She decided, therefore, to live for her brother and lead an austere life.

Some religions (Buddhism and Jainism) believe that women cannot attain liberation in this birth. By doing meritorious service in this birth they can only aspire to be reborn as men in future births in order to secure liberation. Saivism does not accept this notion and Thilakavathiyar is an example, as she attained liberation (mukti) by leading a virtuous life. (Karaikkal ammaiyar and Mangayarkarasiar (two of the 63 nayanmars described in Periya puranam) are also examples of women who achieved mukthi (salvation) in a similar fashion, in the same life, without the need for another birth).

The deaths of his parents and seeing his sister leading a celibate life made Marulneekkiyar to think about the uncertainties of this life. In order to come out of his grief, he engaged himself in various charitable works. Nothing seemed to help him. At that time Jainism was very popular in the country. Attracted by the glitter of their non-violence he became a convert to their religion (called Samana samayam in Tamil).

Out of the four nayanmars Thirunavukkarasar was the only one who was very proficient in Pali, the language of the Jains and Buddhists. Using this talent he mastered the scriptures of their religion so well that within a few years he became a Jain high priest and was given the name Tharumasenar. He used this ability to debate and

conquer the Buddhists. Buddhism was also popular at that time and fighting to establish itself against Jainism.

His sister Thilakavathiyar was heart-broken that he had converted to Jainism and prayed to Lord Siva to save her brother from ignorance and show him His grace. At the request of his sister, Lord Siva made him suffer a disease called "Sulai" (causing severe stomach cramps).

As he found no cure by all the mantras and treatment given by the Jains, Marulneekkiyar decided to go back to his sister whom he thought would be able to help him to cure his disease. She took him to Thiruvadhikai Veeradanam temple, gave him Vibhuti (Holy ash) chanting His (Lord Siva's) Holy five letters, Na Ma Si Va Ya (Panchadsara mantra) and advised him to pray to Lord Siva for his redemption. He prayed to the Lord to relieve him of his pain and sang the "Kootayinavaru Vilakkakileer" pathigam. Lord Siva cured Marulneekkiyar of his pain and gave him the name Thirunavukkarasar (king of the tongue, i.e., singing).

Angered by the reconversion of Thirunavukkarasar to Saivism the Jains reported this to their Pallava king. The king (Mahendravarman) on the advice of the Jains subjected Thirunavukkarasar to many tortures such as putting him in a lime kiln without food and water for a week, feeding him with poisoned milk rice and placing him before a mad elephant. As none of these tortures harmed him, in a last ditch effort to kill him, he was tied to a rock and thrown into the sea. Again he escaped unharmed.

The King, after seeing that he had survived every one of these punishments through the will of God, realised the superiority of the Saiva faith and became a convert to Saivism. (There is nothing better than miracles in this world to quickly change non-believers to believers! The king was no exception). After embracing Saivism the king destroyed the Jain's schools and lodges and built a magnificent Sivan temple at Thiruvathikai and named it as Gunabharaveechuram.

After this, Thirunavukkarasar set out on pilgrimage with his followers and visited many temples all over Tamil country, preaching, singing and working miracles (like waking up a child who died of a

snake bite). At all times he carried a small spade with him to clean the outside of the temples and the circumambulation passages (concentric enclosures) known as prakaras around the temples. This is one of the paths (path of servitude) of attaining liberation for the soul referred to as charya margam (See Chapter 8 for more on this).

He continued to work to re-establish Saivism. At the age of 81 he decided that the time had come for him to leave this world. When he reached Thiruppukalur temple he requested Lord Siva to take him back and sang his last pathigam (Thiruppukalur pathigam) "Punniya! Unnadikke pothukinren" (Oh Lord! Please accept me back to stay under your feet). God yielded to his request and Thirunavukkarasar attained Moksha.

3. Sundaramurthy Nayanar

Sundaramurthy Nayanar was born to a Brahmin couple in Tirunavalur around 8th century AD. They named him 'Nambi Arurar' after his grandfather. When he came of age, his father arranged his marriage.

As the wedding ceremony was about to begin, an old man appeared (Lord Siva in disguise), stating that Arurar was his bond-slave and that he had a document to that effect. Arurar could not marry without the old man's permission, and the old man objected to this marriage. Arurar and the old man had a heated argument. Arurar called him a liar and a madman ("Piththan").

The wedding party and the old man finally agreed to appear before the assembly of learned men of neighbouring Thiruvennai Nallur to have the matter properly adjudicated. The members of the assembly asked the old man whether he could substantiate his claim that Sundarar was his slave with a proof of practice (that Brahmins were enslaved by Brahmins), a document or an eye witness. The old man produced a document that, he claimed, was written by Arurar's grandfather.

The members of the assembly checked with the handwriting of a different article previously written by Arurar's grandfather and were satisfied with the veracity of the bond. They adjudged Arurar as a hereditary bondsman to the old man. The court ordered that he had to

serve the old man. After the trial the assembly members asked about his abode. He took them into Thiruvennai Nallur temple. When they went inside the temple the old man suddenly disappeared proving to them that he was none other than Lord Siva.

When Arurar apologised, Lord Siva told him that before his earthly birth, Arurar had actually been Alala Sundarar who had worked for him at Mount Kailash, serving him by bringing flowers from the garden for his worship. One day Alala Sundarar saw Parvathi's (Lord Siva's consort) maids (two sisters) and fell in love. As love and life are only acceptable on earth, Lord Siva arranged for them to be born on this earth and enjoy a happy life before returning to Mount Kailash in due course. Before he left, Sundarar requested Lord Siva to save him from being trapped from the illusion of life that all other humans had to endure. That is why Lord Siva came as an old man and saved him from this marriage.

Lord Siva told him to carry on with his life as planned and asked him to sing his glories. Sundarar said that he didn't know how to start the hymns. Lord Siva said "As you called me 'Piththan', start the hymn with that". So the first hymn he sang in praise of the Lord starts with "Piththaa! Pirai soodi! Perumaanee! Arulalaa!.. .."

From that day he became a devotee of Lord Siva travelling from place to place around the Tamil country with his followers singing his praise. In the course of his journeys he came to Tiruvarur temple and met Paravaiyar, a chaste woman of the Lord (who was none other than one of the attendants of Parvathi in Mount Kailash). They saw each other and fell in love. As the marriage was pre-ordained by Lord Siva, he himself arranged his marriage through his followers.

One day, Sundarar went into the temple and found a number of devotees of the Lord in the Thevasirian mandapam (the hall in the temple where the devotees assemble). Praising Lord Siva, he lamented out of his yearning that he could be a humble slave of those devotees; he wanted to sing their glories. The Lord Himself gave the first sentence ("Thillai Vaal Anthanar tham Adiyarkkum Adiyen...") of the famous poem Tiruthonda Thogai. Here he recited the names of all the sixty-three Nayanmars (one to three lines each) in that pathigam. This recitation subsequently formed the basis for 'Periya Puranam' (12th Thirumurai) sung by Sekkilar in the twelfth century.

While visiting Tiruvotriyur, near Chennai, he met the other maid of Parvathi, now born as Sangiliar in the Vellala caste, while she was attending the temple. Sundarar was attracted by her beauty and wanted to marry her. He expressed this wish to Lord Siva and the Lord appeared in Sangiliar's dream and asked her to marry Sundarar. For this she said that as he was already married to Paravaiyar he may desert her and therefore she was unable to obey His request. The Lord said to get a promise from Sundarar that he will not leave her under any circumstance.

Sundarar accordingly promised her and the marriage was solemnised. After some time he remembered the Thiruvarur spring festival ('Vasantha Utsavam'), a festival that is celebrated annually in a grand scale. He wanted to see that festival and forgot about the promise he gave to Sangiliar and left for Thiruvarur.

As soon as he crossed the border of Tiruvotriyur both his eyes were blinded (a punishment given by Lord Siva for breaking the promise). As you can see, even if you are a friend of the Lord you will be punished for misdeeds. Sundarar went on with the help of devotees singing and begging God's forgiveness in every temple on the way to Thiruvarur. Finally he regained the sight in his left eye at Kanchipuram Ekambareswarar temple and the right eye at Thiruvarur.

Sundarar continued wandering around the land of the Tamils singing devotional songs dedicated to Siva. He also performed several miracles (one such incident was rescuing a boy from the jaws of a crocodile in Avinasi). He became a friend of the Cera king - Ceraman Perumal Nayanar. They travelled together to several temples and worshipped the Lord.

When he was eighteen years old, he went to Tiruvanjaikkalam temple and requested to the Lord to end the term of his stay in this world (where he helped to re-establish Saivism to its original glory and more specifically sung Tiruthonda Thogai glorifying the deeds of 63 Nayanmars). Lord Siva sent a white elephant to pick him up and he flew on that elephant to Mount Kailash and joined the Lord to live with him forever.

4. Manikkavasakar

Manikkavasakar Swamikal lived in the early ninth century AD. He was born at Thiruvadhavur near Madurai and his given name was Thiruvadhavurar. He grew up to be a promising young man. King Arimarttana Pandiyan who was ruling Madurai at that time heard about him and appointed him as his prime minister.

One day, the head of his cavalry told the king that the cavalry was deficient in horses and needed immediate replenishment. The king had heard about horses that had landed for sale at his port town by a merchant from Arabia. He sent his prime minister to buy them for him.

On the way, at Thirupperunthurai, Thiruvadavurar met a Guru (Lord Siva in disguise) with his disciples under a Guruntha tree. When he saw the Guru and disciples he became a convert to this Guru and remained there as his disciple. He was initiated by the guru, which resulted in him becoming a total devotee to the Lord, forgetting the king and his mission. He spent all of the king's money in building a temple at Thirupperunthurai. The Guru gave him the name Manikkavasakar because the words he utters are precious as that of the gemstone ruby (manikkam means ruby in Tamil).

On hearing these events, the king ordered Manikkavasakar to return to the court immediately. Before Manikkavasakar left, the Guru promised to bring the best horses to the kingdom on a fixed date in August. When Manikkavasakar returned to the kingdom, the king imprisoned him for misappropriation of Government funds.

Lord Siva (The Guru) converted the jackals of the forest into horses and appearing as a 'horse trader' he presented them to the king on the appointed date. King Pandiyan was so pleased with the quality of the horses that he immediately released his prime minister from jail.

That night, the horses turned into jackals and ran away. Enraged, the king inflicted further punishment on his minister. He made him stand, looking upwards, on the hot sand of the Vaikai River with stones placed on his fore head and both arms.

When the king punished Manikkavasakar for the first time it was with good reason: for misappropriation of Government funds. The second time however the king was in the wrong. Once he had accepted the horses from the horse trader, then whatever happened to the horses thereafter (whether they turned into jackals or not) was his own responsibility and not that of Manikkavasakar.

To grace his devotee, Lord Siva flooded the river Vaikai. To prevent further destruction by the floods, all citizens of Madurai were ordered to repair the river banks where the flood had breached. Each was allocated a portion of the bank to repair.

There was an old lady by the name of Vanthi who had no relatives and made her living by selling pittu (steamed rice and coconut cake). As she was helpless to fill her portion of the river bank, she prayed to Lord Siva for help. He came as a worker and said to the old lady that he would work on the bank for loose pittu. She agreed. He would eat a little of the pittu, work a little and then sleep for a time, wake up, eat some more pittu, work a little and sleep some more. This went on for some time. While everyone else had repaired their sections of the river bank, Vanthi's portion remained unfinished.

Upon hearing the report, the king arrived, saw the sleeping worker and caned him. As soon as the cane struck his back, the labourer disappeared and everyone including the king felt the pain in their backs. The king realized that the worker was the Lord himself. He felt remorseful for the way he had treated Manikkavasakar. Immediately he released him from his punishment and begged for the saint's pardon. Manikkavasakar was allowed to leave his job as prime minister.

Thereafter, Manikkavasakar went on a pilgrimage to many temples and finally came to Chidambaram. He was looking for his Guru and singing Thiruvasakam. He defeated the Sri Lankan Buddhists while at Chidambaram. He made the mute daughter of the king speak and gave fitting answers to those questions put by the Buddhist monks. The king and the Buddhist monks recognised the superiority of Saivism and embraced it.

One day, Lord Siva Himself appeared in disguise as an old Brahmin and asked him to sing the Thiruvasakam so that he could write it down. Manikkavasakar recited the Thiruvasakam and the Brahmin (Lord Siva) wrote it down on palm leaves. He then asked him to sing the songs of love keeping the Dancing Lord of Thillai as the Hero. The exact words were "Pavai paadiya vaayaal kovai paduka". In response to this request he sang Thirukkovaiyar.

Siva wrote this as well and put his seal as "Manikkavasakar sang this and Lord of Thiruchchirrambalam wrote it down". He then placed the scripts in the panchakkara steps (five steps to the inner sanctum) of the abode and vanished.

The next day the priests of Chidambaram temple were surprised to find the scripture on the panchakkara steps with the Lord's signature. They rushed to Manikkavasakar, showed him what they found and asked him to explain to them the philosophical meaning of the compositions. He took them to Ponnambalam (inner sanctum of the temple, where the roof is lined by gold) and pointed at the dancing deity and said "He is the meaning of it" and merged himself at the feet of Lord Natarajah. When this happened, he was 32 years old. Thiruvasakam and Thirukkovaiyar were later edited as the eighth Thirumurai.

Thevaram & Thiruvasakam

Thevaram means 'garland for the Lord' and are hymns sung by Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar and Sundaramurthy Nayanar. These hymns were meant to raise the spirits of the Tamil/ Saiva people and make them to return to practise Tamil and Saivism. Therefore the hymns were to uplift their spirits to re-introduce bhakthi, worship and spirituality into the hearts and minds of the ordinary people by extolling the virtues of Lord Siva, his greatness and his grace.

The hymns of Manikkavasakar are called Thiruvasakam, meaning 'the sacred word'. They exhibit a more intense kind of devotion. Thiruvasakam conveys immense love for Siva and the mystical Siva experience of a devotee who went looking for his guru after he disappeared from Thirupperunthurai. There is a saying that

"thiruvachakaththukku urukadhar oru vachakaththukkum urukar", meaning, 'people who do not get melted (or moved) by pious emotion emanating from the "sacred utterances" do not melt (get moved) for any other utterances of any emotions'.

Thirugnanasambandar's relationship with God is like a son to his father called *satputra margam.* This path of attaining liberation of the soul is similar to *kriyamargam.*

Thirunavukkarasar's relationship with God is described as *dasa margam,* meaning "path of servitude," (God as master and the soul as servant). This path of attaining liberation of the soul is similar to *charya margam.*

Sundaramurthy Nayanar's relationship with God is described as *sakha margam,* meaning God is like a friend. This path of attaining liberation of the soul is similar to *yoga margam.*

Manikkavasakar's relationship with God is like guru- sysya (teacher- student) relationship called *Sanmargam.* This path of attaining liberation of the soul is similar to *Jnana margam* (See Chapter 8 for more on this).

CHAPTER 6: THE SYMBOLS OF SAIVISM

Vibhuti, Rudraksha and Panchadsara are the symbols of Saivism

1. *Vibhuti or Thiruneeru (Holy Ash)*

Vibhuti is obtained by burning cow dung in the ritual fire. The cow is an animal held in veneration by the Saivites. Vibhuti that is properly prepared should be white in colour.

"Holy ash which is white in colour is proper to be worn. Holy ash which is dark, reddish, smoky or golden in colour should not be worn." Sri-la-Sri Arumuga Navalar[6]

Vibhuti should be preserved in a new container with added scented flowers (like jasmine) and covered with a clean cloth. The amount required for daily use can be removed from time to time and stored in a small round metal case ('sampudam' in Tamil) or a small silk bag.

The Holy ash should be worn, facing north or east, saying "Siva Siva" as it is applied (smeared) on the forehead, chest and two shoulders, using the right hand index, middle and the ring fingers. This method is called *"uththoolnam"*. In this case, Vibhuti is used in powder form. This is the common method of applying Vibhuti. It should not be spilled on the ground or wasted. To avoid spilling one could tilt the head backwards when applying Vibhuti on the fore head. If it falls to the ground it should be removed and cleaned with a wet cloth in such a way that no one will step on it.

The second method is to wear it in the form of three lines (*"Tripundaram"*) by those who have received diksha (Siva theedsai), the ritual initiation into the religion. Here, a little water is added to Vibhuti to make it into a paste and applied to16 prescribed parts of the body (top of the head, fore head, chest, umbilicus (belly button), both knees, both upper arms, both elbows, both wrists, both loins, back and neck).

Generally there is no formal process of "initiation" to Saivism (like a 'Baptism' in Christianity) to mark the beginning of one's spiritual life. Saivites believe that anyone can attain the goals of spiritual life as long as they are practised sincerely.

This is well illustrated by the fact that when Thirunavukkarasar returned to Saivism from Jainism after many years, there were no purification rites of any form carried out. His sister simply gave him "Thiruneeru" while chanting the holy five letters, Na Ma Si Va Ya (*Panchadsara mantra*) and then led him into the temple. "Thiruneeru" (Vibhuti) purifies the one who wears it.

We should understand that priests and orthodox Saivites do undergo "initiation" called 'Siva theedsai' as part of their religious practice. Anyone who is very serious about or deeply committed to Saivism usually undertakes "Siva theedsai" from a priest (Sivachchariyar). After this, the disciple should continue this for the rest of his or her life.

Sandalwood paste (*Santhanam*) is worn on the forehead as a "pottu" (round spot). It should NOT be worn on top of the Vibhuti. It should be worn below the Vibhuti in between the two eyebrows, using the right ring finger. Santhanam reminds us of the third eye of Lord Siva.

Kunkumum (a red powder) is applied on top of the Santhanam. Kunkumum is not a Saiva symbol. It came as a beauty spot and also to indicate a married woman.

There are lots of hymns describing the glory of the holy ash in Saiva Thirumurai. Thirugnanasambandar cured the severe burning sensation experienced by the Pandya King (Koon Pandiyan) by applying the holy ash onto his body and singing the following hymn (Thiruneetup pathigam - See Thirugnanasambandar's story above).

"Manthiramaavathu Neeru, Vaanavar meelathu Neeru,

Suntharamavathu Neeru, Thuthikkappaduvathu Neeru..."

(Meaning: Thiruneeru is the mantra, it is respected more than the Devas in the heaven, it gives beauty to those who wear it, and everyone worships it.)

The ash is what is left when things are burnt. In natural terms it is the final state where everything else has been burnt off. This indicates the transient nature of all material things and of all human beings and the permanence of the God.

A puranic explanation given to Vibhuti is that Lord Siva burnt Kaama, the God of desires, after he disturbed Siva's penance. Therefore Vibhuti signifies burning of desires and conquering it. It also makes us aware of the uncertainty of life because we all finally end up as ashes!

2. Rudraksha

The word rudraksha (a bead) means the eye of Lord Rudra (another name for Lord Siva). It represents the tears shed by Lord Siva when the Devas described to him their sufferings at the hands of the asuras (demons) of the "Tripura" (the three cities: one of gold, one of silver and one of iron) and appealed to him to save them. Therefore it signifies Lord Siva's eternal grace upon every soul.

Rudraksha beads grow on trees in the Himalayan regions of ndia and Nepal.These beads come with different numbers of faces (1-16); each type has its own significance. They are very holy and one should wear them with great respect. They can be adorned in varying numbers in different parts of the body. Example: 26 beads around the head and 54 or 108 around the neck as garlands. Rudraksha beads are considered to have a positive effect (both medically and spiritually) on those who wear them properly.

It is claimed that the rudraksha possesses magnetic power that is beneficial to our body and mind. Hence, wearing a rudraksha malai (chain) brings good health and mental peace. It is supposed to reduce heat in the body, bring down blood pressure and also relieve mental pressure and tension (stress). Most beads have a hole in the centre, as if nature intended man to use the Rudraksha bead to form a chain!

Rudraksha rosary is used as an aid to count during prayer (See below under *Japam*).

3.Panchadsara Mantra

The five sacred syllables - 'Na' 'Ma' 'Si' 'Va''Ya' are called *Panchadsara*. It means "I bow to Siva". The mystical syllable Aum is added to it to give strength.

"Aum Namasivaya" is a very powerful mantra and is among the foremost Vedic mantras. It is the mantra of Lord Siva and it is the supreme mantra of Saivism.

"Namasivaya is the most holy name of God Siva, recorded at the very centre of the Vedas and elaborated in the Saiva agamas. Na is the Lord's concealing grace, Ma is the world, Si stands for Siva, Va is His revealing grace, Ya is the soul. The five elements, too, are embodied in this ancient formula for invocation. Na is earth, Ma is water, Si is fire, Va is air, and Ya is ether, or akasha. Many are its meanings".

Satguru Sivaya Subramaniyaswami (a 20th century saint and spiritual teacher based at the Kauai's monastery in Hawaii).



Fig.12. AUM

One may also chant 'SI' 'VA' 'YA' 'NA' 'MA' (*Sivayanama).* Generally this is to be chanted only by those who have received Deeksha.

The symbol Aum also pronounced Om (also called Pranava) is the most sacred symbol in Saivism. Pranava means the primordial reverberating sound, which fills the universe. The entire universe stems from the vibration of the sound 'Aum'. It is prefixed and suffixed to all Saiva/Hindu mantras and incantations.The letters A, U & M represent God, Soul & Malam (bondage - see Chapter 8).

"Sound originates in the vocal system, commencing from the larynx with the opening of the mouth, passing through the throat, and ending with the closing of the lips, by the contact of different parts of the mouth with the tongue. Between opening and closing of the mouth we produce all the words, which represent all our experiences and concepts. When we open the mouth we utter 'a' and when we close the lips, we utter 'm'. Thus between 'a' and 'm' come all the other sounds and words that are uttered. Inserting in the middle the vowel 'u', which rolls through the throat over the whole tongue, we cover the entire beginning, middle, and end of all words symbolically. In Sanskrit when 'a' and 'u' are combined, it gives us the sound 'o' and we get Om (AUM). As Aum represents the beginning, middle and end of all words, Om is symbolic of the entire existence" - Swami Mukhyananda [10]

Japam and *Dhyanam using Aum Namasivaya*

Aum Namasivaya is a very powerful mantra. Repetition of "**Aum Namasivaya**" is called *japam* and contemplation is called *dhyanam.* There are three types of mantra japas, namely, *maanasam, upaanchu* and *vaasakam.*

Maanasam is chanting in the mind without the tip of the tongue touching the lips.

The *upaanchu* is chanting in a very low tone with the tip of the tongue touching the lips so that only the person who chants can hear. This is also referred to as *mantham.*

Vaasakam is chanting loud so that it may be heard by people nearby. This is also called *baashyam.*

There is a difference in the effects of these three types of chanting mantras. *Vaasakam* gives one hundred times the effect, *upaanchu* gives ten thousand times the effect and *maanasam* gives ten million times the effect. In other words, the quieter the chanting, the more powerful is the effect.

A rosary (made of rudraksha) can be used for counting. The rosary should be placed across the fore finger (if chanting vaasakam manner), middle finger (if chanting upaanchu manner) and ring finger (if chanting maanasam manner).

While performing Japam, each seed is pushed with the thumb downwards for worldly riches and upwards if one wants moksha (liberation).

To summarise, a Saivite performing Japam takes a bath (or at least washes his face, hands and feet) prior to praying. He wears Vibhuti (holy ash) and sits in padmasana (or lotus position - a cross-legged sitting position used in meditative practices of Saivism), facing east or north, in a quiet place or room. He then repeats silently the Panchadsara mantra and meditate on the form of Lord Siva. He may use a rosary bead made of rudraksha to count the number of times he says the mantra.

CHAPTER 7: THE TEMPLE, PUJAS AND CONDUCT IN THE TEMPLE

Previously, in Chapter 3, we discussed the *" Symbolism of Hindu Gods"*. In this chapter we will look at the temple, pujas and the way one should conduct oneself in a temple. We know that God exists everywhere. Then why do we have to pray him in temples?

"Electrical energy is everywhere, but in order to bring it to our daily use, we need to have generators to channel that energy and transmission systems to distribute it at the places where we need it. In the same way, in order to get the grace of the omnipresent Lord, we have to build temples, where we can focus the power of the Lord in a consecrated idol for our benefit in an easy way"(Sankaracharya Swamigal of Kanchi Kamakoti peetam).

Temple in Tamil is referred to as 'Koyil' meaning the place (or residence) of God that is reserved for religious or spiritual activities, such as prayer. It is a holy place where God manifests himself in divine form. As explained in Chapter 3, it is difficult for the average

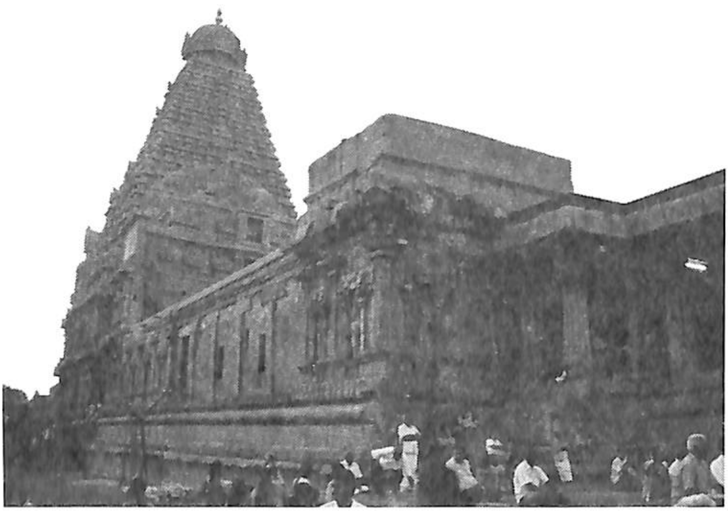


Fig.13. (Brihadisvarar Temple - Thanjavur)

person to understand and worship God as being formless. Therefore, rishis conceived the idea of worship of deities that have been ritually installed in a temple (according to the agamas - See Chapter 2 for more on the agamas).

There is a saying in Tamil: "koyil illa ooril kudiyirukka veendaam" (do not live in a place that has no temple). Appar Swamigal said: "a place without a temple is a place without divine qualities" ("thiruk koyil illaatha thiruvil uurum"). So, one can see how much importance is placed by Tamils/Saivites on temples in their daily life.

South Indian temples are of typical Dravidian style and usually built of stones. Saiva temples are constructed as described in the agama sastras. There are thousands of temples in Tamil Nadu. The Pallavas (500-900 AD) and the Cholas (850-1279 AD) were the great builders of temples. The Brihadisvara temple in Thanjavur is referred to as "periya koyil" (tallest temple) because the 'vimanam' (temple tower) is 216 ft (66 m) high and is among the tallest of its kind in the world. It is made of hard granite stone.

Temples are normally dedicated to one primary God.



Fig.14. Vimanam

The innermost sanctuary of the temple (sanctum sanctorum) contains the principal image of the deity. This is referred to as the *Garbhagriha*. The garbhagriha is small in scale when compared to the whole temple complex. Externally, however, it has a towering roof-structure called the vimanam.

Large pillared halls or mandapas are common in all south Indian temple architecture. These halls are used for various purposes. For example, the Vasantha mandapa is where the devotees assemble for puja to the festival images prior to them being taken in procession.

Rajagopuram ("grand entrance tower of the temple") is the rising tower at the entrance of a temple. These are exquisitely decorated with sculpture and carvings and painted with themes from Saiva mythology, particularly those associated with the presiding deity.

The Rajagopuram rises from the base area moving up in progressively smaller tiers. The tiers can be five, seven, nine or eleven in number, depending on the size of the temple. Some temples have many towers (usually four, one on each side) representing the

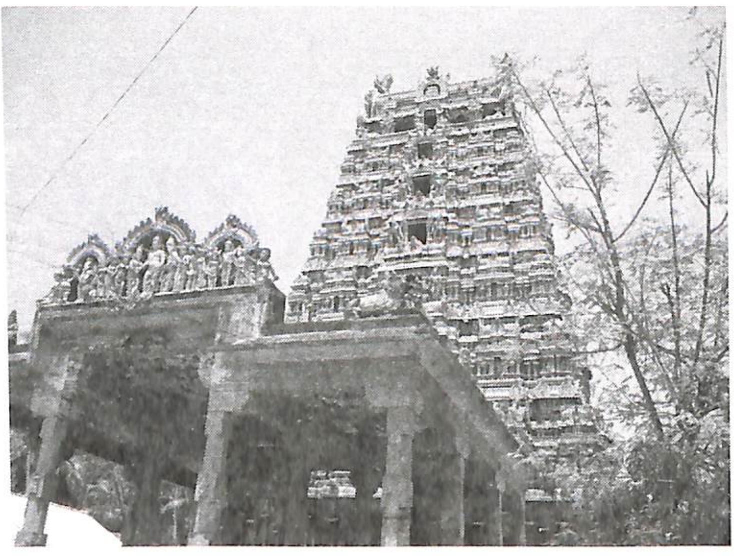


Fig.15. Rajagopuram

different entrances of the temple. Rajagopuram is the main entrance. It is in line with the main sanctum, dwajasthambam, balipeetam and Nandi (See below).

It is believed that just having a glimpse of the temple gopuram, even from far away, you may derive the same spiritual merit as that of coming to the temple and offering prayers to the deities ("gopura dharsanam kodi punniyam").

In many temples, at the entrance to the temple you will see a small shrine for Ganesha on its right and a shrine for Muruga on the left side. In some temples only the Ganesha shrine is seen on the right side. Placing it in front of the temple make it easier to offer prayers to Ganesha first before entering the temple (See below for more on this). Once you have passed the rajagopuram you will see the *balipeetam, dwajasthambam and Nandi.*

Dwajasthambam: (kodi maram or kodi kambam in Tamil) literally means "Flag pole". This is placed between the rajagopuram and the main sanctum. In most temples in India the dwajasthambam is placed in between Nandi and balipeetam (as seen in the picture

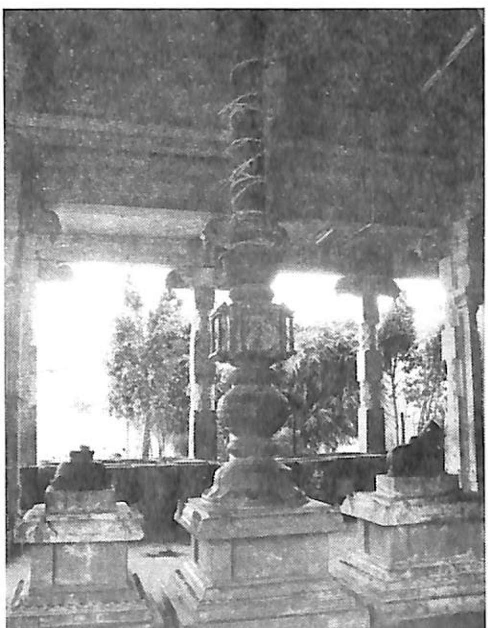


Fig.16. Balipeetam, Dwajasthambam and Nandi

below). Temples in Sri Lanka and a minority of temples in India have the dwajasthambam, balipeetam and Nandi placed in that order facing the garbhagriha.

The dwajasthambam has six rings on it at equal distances. These represent the six chakras in our body through which the yogi (through yoga) raises the Kundalini, "the serpent power", upward, piercing the various centres until reaching the crown of the head called Sahasrara (seventh chakra), resulting in union with God (see Chapter 9).

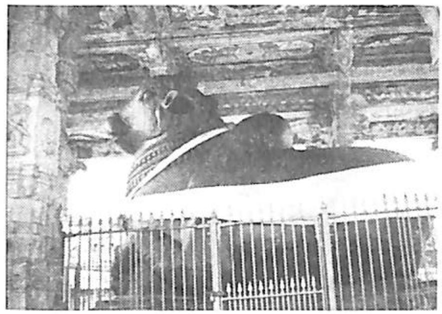
The flag pole represents God (pathi), the flag represents the soul (pasu) and the rope used to hoist the flag represents bondage (pasam refer Chapter 8). The process of hoisting the flag signifies how the soul frees itself from bondage to attain liberation (mukthi - see Chapter 8).

Special flags are raised during festivals to mark the occasion. The insignia made of copper or brass fixed like a flag to the top of the post vary according to the presiding deity in the temple. The figure on the insignia is invariably that of the vahana (vehicle) of the deity. For instance, in Siva temples it is Nandi and in Amman (Goddess Parvathi) temples it is the lion.



Fig.17. Top of the Dwajasthambam

Balipeetam: The pedestal or the top portion of the balipeetam is in the shape of lotus flower and usually carries the foot print of the presiding deity. Final services will be conducted at this site after the completion of the daily puja for all the deities in the temple. The balipeetam also signifies removing the bondage of the souls and purifying them. There is every reason to believe that the sacrificial post and the sacrificial pedestal of the Vedic age have metamorphosed into the dwajasthambam and the balipeetam of today.



Nandi lies in front of the balipeetam looking towards the God in the garbhagriha. Nandi is a highly evolved soul looking directly at mula murti (God), in contemplation of Lord Siva. According to Hindu mythology, Nandi is also the gatekeeper of Siva's abode at Mount Kailash. An idol of Nandi facing the main shrine is seen in every Sivan temple.

In temples for other deities there is a Nandi (not to be confused with Siva's vahana Nandi) which usually is the animal or the bird that is considered as the vahana of that deity (for example, a lion is the Nandi in Amman temples). Nandi, in this case means gatekeeper for that particular deity.

Mula murti (deity in the *garhbagriha)*, nandi and balipeetam represent God (pati), soul (pasu) and bondage (pasam), respectively. (It is very similar to the flagpole, flag and the rope discussed earlier).

The immovable image of the presiding deity is generally made of granite stone. The deity being worshipped determines the character of each shrine. These granite stone images in the sanctums are usually consecrated (consecration means to sanctify or to make holy or sacred) after several days of holy rituals as prescribed in the agamas.

In other words we are invoking divine powers into these images. At the end of the rituals for consecration, kumbabishekam takes place. This is the final act in the long process of invoking the

blessing of God. As part of the ritual, the chief priest reaches the top of the vimanam (directly above the garhbagriha) and pours "holy" water over the kalasam to signify the divine nature of the tower.

Kumbabishekam should be performed every twelve years from the original installation of the deity. It recharges the spiritual power of the deity and the Kalasam (copper bowl on top of the Vimana which is also charged with the same power as the deity) of the temple tower.

Other images called 'festival images' ('utsava murti' in Tamil) are usually made of bronze. These can be of the presiding deity or other deities. Most temples have both. These bronze images are the ones used during festival processions (around *prakaras* - see below) and other pujas.

There are many circumambulation passages (concentric enclosures) around the garhbagriha referred to as *prakaras* (veethi in Tamil). The number depends on the size of the temple. These prakaras along with the series of entrance gateways (*gopuras*) reduce in scale moving towards the *garbhagriha.* Subsidiary shrines are also found along these passage ways, within the temple complexes.

The above description is only applied to Sivan temples. In other temples many variations can be seen as prescribed in the agamas. Many temples have outer walls plastered in vertical red and white lines, to signify them as a place of worship by Saivites. These are later additions that represent Siva and Sakthi.

This is the typical architectural design of a south Indian temple, with some variations depending on the presiding deity. However, in many temples, especially in western countries, the description is markedly changed to accommodate and satisfy many different groups of people, colder weather and financial restrictions.

Unlike South Indian (Saiva, Vaishnava) temples, many north Indian temples are simple in construction. The devotees are permitted to enter the innermost sanctum of the deity and worship personally. This innermost sanctum is followed by a large hall for worshippers to stand in and pray (darshan). The tallest tower is built

over the sanctum sanctorum which is different from that of south Indian temples. There is space for the devotees to circumambulate the shrine. The rituals themselves are very simple compared to what is done in South Indian temples. This is due to the fact that the agama influence is stronger in the south than in the north.

We should make it a habit to visit temples daily and offer prayers. If we are unable to do this every day, we should at least visit once or twice a week. Tuesdays and Fridays are the best, since these two days are considered more auspicious than the other days. In addition to these days we should also visit temples on festive days and certain holy days such as paurnami (full moon), amavasai (new moon), Vinayakar chaturthi (Ganesha's birthday) and Skandha Sashti (see Chapter 11).

Puja: Puja in Sanskrit means an act of reverence to a God through invocations, prayers and rituals.

Worship (prarthana) is the first step towards pursuing bhakti (path of love and devotion in the worship of Lord Siva). The second step is puja, a specific form of worship that involves an offering to God. Rituals are the external way of worship for a devotee who is progressing on the path to God. Worship involves all the three faculties of thought, word and deed. Thought is the process of the contemplation of God; word is the mantras or the words of prayer uttered during the puja and the deed is the various acts connected with the actual puja.

Abhisekam in Sanskrit means bathing or smearing all over the body. It is the ritual bathing of the deity and is usually carried out for the presiding deity in the sanctum sanctorum. Oil, milk, ghee, curd, rose water young coconut water (ilani), fruits (panchamirtham) and honey are used to perform the abhisekam. Following abhisekam the deity is dressed and decorated with flowers and jewels (referred to as alankara).

After the Abhisekam and alankara, the puja takes place. In temples, the puja has to be done by the priests appointed for that specific purpose. They are usually trained for this following a ritual initiation. They also need to be knowledgeable in Sanskrit as the pujas and rituals are carried out according to the agamas (which are

written in Sanskrit). They should also be knowledgeable in Thirumurai and other Tamil devotional hymns.

During pujas, Sanskrit mantras are chanted, deepaharati (ceremonial waving of the lamps to illuminate the image of the deity) is carried out to the deity and food (*naivedyam* meaning an offering made to a deity) is offered. The food items blessed during the ceremony, known as *prasadam* are distributed to the attendant devotees after the puja. This is another form of external worship.

Pujas are usually carried out six times a day. It should be carried out a minimum of once a day. Many temples have specialized Thirumurai singers (music professionals) called "othuvars" to sing Thirumurai during pujas.

The Puja carried out in the home is performed in a sacred corner of the house or in a prayer room using the sculptures and images of Gods as deities. Saivites are required to follow certain observances daily.

Every *Saivite* should pray in the mornings and evenings after bathing and dressing but prior to taking any food or drink. Before the prayer one should apply holy ash on the forehead uttering "Siva Siva" and begin to chant the holy hymns of *'panchapuranam'* (meaning five hymns).

The five songs are from the "Twelve Thirumurai": one from Thevaram, one from Thiruvasakam, one song each from the ninth Thirumurai's Thiruvisaippa and Thiruppallandu and one song from the twelfth Thirumurai (Puranam). It is now customary to sing a Thiruppukal hymn after the panchapuranam (See Chapter 4).

Usually a lamp is lit in front of the deities. Flowers and water are offered. On special days like Tuesdays and Fridays (or daily if one wishes) this could include providing an offering of incense, along with flowers. On very special days like New Year and Pongal (See Chapter 11), food may be offered.

To attain the blessings of God, Saiva philosophy advocates two paths: one is bhakti (devotion) and the other is gnana (wisdom).

Thirugnanasambandar said in one of his hymns:

"Kathalakik kasinthu kannir malki
Othuvar thamai nannerikkuipeathu
Vetham naankinum meipporulaavathu
Nathan namam "Namasivaya"vee."

The meaning of this hymn is that if you show love, shed tears from your eyes through deep devotion to God and if you say 'Namasivaya' regularly, this is far superior to the chanting of all four Vedas and it will show you the path to liberation (mukthi or moksha).

Conduct in the Temples

Since the temple is a place of divinity, we have to observe certain rules while inside the temple. Taking a bath and wearing freshly washed clothes before entering the temple is essential. You should enter the temple with a clean body and mind. On arrival at the temple, feet and hands should be washed. A water tap for this purpose is usually available in most temples. In Sri Lanka and India the temple ponds serve this purpose. You should take something to offer to the



Fig.18. Asdanga Namaskaram

Lord (archanai - A tray with flowers, fruits and food) and not enter the temple with footwear.

Once inside the temple, you should first apply holy ash (thiruneeru) to your forehead while saying "Siva Siva". Santhanam (sandalwood paste) and kunkumam (a red powder) are also to be worn as prescribed (See Chapter 6 for more on this).

Offer prayers to Ganesha first on entering the temple. Prostrate in front of the flag column (dwajasthambam), which is situated next to Nandi and balipeetam (see above). Prostration should be carried out facing north, in a certain prescribed way. Men carry this out lying flat on their belly using eight parts of the body, the head, two shoulders, two hands, two ears and the chin (see fig.18). This is called "asdanga namaskaram."

Women carry out "panchanga namaskaram" by bending on their knees and touching the fore head to the ground using five different parts of the body, namely head, two hands and two knees (see fig.19). Do not prostrate anywhere else in the temple.

Trianga namaskaram is another form of namaskaram that can be done by both sexes. Both hands are raised twelve inches above



Fig.19. Panchanga Namaskaram

the head during prayer. This is often done during gopura dharsan (before entering and leaving the temple), prayer in front of the subsidiary shrines and during deepaharati (see earlier section). Prostration should not be done in any of these places.

Then, circumambulation (walking around) of the temple should be done, usually three times. Visiting the shrines of the minor deities can also be done during this time. Circumambulation should not be done if the puja has already started. In that case, it should be done after the puja is finished.

If there is enough time before the start of the puja, this time can be best utilised by chanting *Panchadsara* Mantra (see chapter 6) silently or singing the Thirumurai again without disturbing others (idle gossip should be avoided while inside the temple precinct).

While inside the temple you should try and help maintain cleanliness. This means not throwing anything on the floor or getting rid of the excess santhanum or kunkumum by wiping your hands on the temple pillars or walls (unfortunately people often do this). Observe silence and try to withdraw your mind into the thoughts of God. (Turn off your mobile phones or any other electronic gadgets).

Bells are rung in the temples during puja to shut out the external sounds and to help turn the mind inward to concentrate. (It is also to invite the Devas for the puja). Incense is burnt before the deity to spread the smoke through the whole room which gives a pleasant atmosphere to pray (as well as acting as a disinfectant in a place where many congregate in a small area).

Burning of camphor denotes that the individual ego melts like the camphor and the soul becomes free to be liberated. The pasting of sandalwood reminds the devotee that though the sandalwood is crushed and ground, it silently wears itself out, emanating only very sweet odour. Like the sandalwood, one should return good for evil.

As a final act, offer prayers to Chandeswarar and take his permission for prasadam and other materials of worship which are taken out of the temple. Chandeswarar is one of the sixty three Nayanmars (leaders). Lord Siva made him head of his devotees and

said to him, "everything that is offered to me by devotees including the food, ornaments and dress are for you after my usage".

His temple is located opposite to where the water used for abhisekam pours out. As he is always in contemplation of Lord Siva, before offering prayers and getting permission to carry worship materials from temple you should clap your hands very gently (not loudly), to get his attention. Placing threads from the shawls (salvai) in front of Chandeswarar should not be done (somehow this practice has become common).

On coming out of the temple, again prostrate in front of the flag column facing north. Before leaving the precincts of the temple, you should sit quietly in a corner and meditate for a few minutes.

Temple worship teaches us how to live our life correctly, encourages ethical and moral behaviour and compassion for all livings, with the ultimate goal of freeing the soul from bondage and attain liberation.

CHAPTER 8: SAIVA SIDDHANTA - THE PHILOSOPHY OF SAIVISM

"Siddhanta means the established conclusion arrived at after considering all (religious) views (*sinthithuk kanda mudivu*). Anta means the end or conclusion. Thus Saiva Siddhanta is the philosophy of Saiva religion which relates to the established conclusion of the ultimate truth in religious matters". Dr K. Ganesalingam[8]

As I mentioned in the Preface, all humans seem to be programmed to ask:

Who Am I?

Where Did I Come From?

Where Am I Going?

What is my destiny?

What should I do to fulfil my destiny?

Saiva Siddhanta answers all these questions!

Saivism considers Siva as the Supreme deity. There are three types of Saivism practised in India today. They are *Kashmir Saivism* that developed in Kashmir in the north of India, *Vira Saivism* that developed in Karnataka and *Siddhanta Saivism* that developed in Tamil Nadu and is practised there, in Sri Lanka and in other Tamil speaking countries/communities. There are some differences in their philosophies and practices but the basic concepts are the same. Today Siddhanta Saivism has over sixty million adherents.

The 14 authoritative books of Saiva Siddhanta are called *Meikanda Sastras*. Elements of Siddhanta philosophy are also seen scattered throughout the Vedas (particularly the Upanishads), Agamas, early Tamil works (eg. Thirukkural) and the devotional hymns of Nayanmars.

Saiva agamas that glorify God as Siva gave rise to Saiva Siddhanta. Saint Meikandar of the 13th century codified these philosophical thoughts in his work *Sivagnanabodham*. Because this work is considered the primary text of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, all of the Saiva Siddhanta texts (14 of them) are collectively referred to as *Meikanda Sastras*.

Saiva Siddhanta postulates three entities as eternal (they have neither beginning nor end). They are *Pathi, Pasu and Pasam (God, Soul and Bondage)*. God is one and souls are many. Pasam consists of anava, karma and maya (anavam, kanmam and mayai-see below). Pathi and pasu have knowledge inherent in them whereas pasam is inanimate. Saiva Siddhanta philosophy explains the nature of these three entities, their relationship and shows the way to liberation (mukthi).

God – For Saivites, God is Siva. He is the supreme God and is formless. As described earlier, he has many qualities attributed to him (e.g. formless, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent - see Chapter 3). It is not possible to give a definition or a description of something that is beyond perception. He is to be found everywhere and in everything. Siva is referred to as Pathi (meaning lord) as he is the lord of the souls.

Soul - These are innumerable. Each living thing has a separate soul. The anava (see below), which is inherent in the soul, causes ignorance. It prevents the soul's power to know, act and desire. Out of compassion God endows the soul with a physical body, faculties of the mind and a world with things for the soul's enjoyment (to perform its actions) thereby enabling it to free itself from the bondage.

Vedanta philosophy states that the soul is part of 'Brahman' (God), that broke away and will go back to join him at liberation. Saiva Siddhanta does not accept this view and considers both the soul and God as ever different entities and even at liberation (mukthi) the soul will enjoy eternal bliss at the feet of Lord Siva.

The relationship between God and the soul is described as three kinds: God is one with the soul, along with the soul and separate from the soul (*onrai, udanai, verai iruththal*). It is called the *advaita* relationship.

Bondage (Pasam) - *Pasam* means the one that binds the soul. Bondage is comprised of anava, karma and maya also referred to as the three *malas* or impurities:

1. Anava is inherent in the soul and causes ignorance. Anavam is associated with the soul from the beginningless period, like the husk of paddy or verdigiris on copper (bluish green encrustration formed on copper or brass by atmospheric oxidation). It prevents the soul's power to know, act and desire. Anava means that which makes the soul small like an atom.

2. Karma (*vinai in Tamil, also called pava - punniyangal*) is the effect of our good and bad actions, from previous births. It binds the soul to the consequences of its actions ("as you sow, so will you reap"). Karma is not fate. According to the karma each individual reaps the fruits of his own actions, performed in this life or previous lives.

This logically explains the disparities in life that we see, for example: one person is born happy and another unhappy; one is rich and another is poor; one is healthy while the other is unhealthy. If one has performed evil deeds in the past it will result in bad experiences whereas good deeds will result in good experiences.

There are three types of karma namely *agamiyam, sanchitham and prarabdham*. Agamiyam is the karma that we do in this birth. Sanchitham is the accumulated karma from past births which follows us from birth to birth. You are reborn to work through your sanchitham. As we can not work through all the sanchitha karma, we are assigned a portion of it at a time; this portion is called prarabdham. While working through prarabdham we continue accumulating more karma (agamiyam) as well. This will be carried on to our next birth (added to the balance of our sanchitham).

This can be explained as: the s*anchitham* is like your savings account in a bank. You are taking some money from it to spend. This is *prarabdham*. While spending, you are making more money. This is *agamiyam* which will be added on to your savings account for future use.

3. Maya gives the physical body, the inner faculties *mind and intellect* (*manam* and *buddhi)* and the world to the soul to perform its actions and thereby enable it to free itself from the bondage.

Vedanta philosophy considers maya as an illusion. In Saiva Siddhanta, it is considered as real (like God and the soul). The body with its faculties are created from maya by God. It is a subtle entity which is the cause of this world and worldly things. The 'worlds' that originated from maya, first appear as *tatvas*. Tatvas are the building blocks of the worldly things. Saiva Siddhanta speaks of 36 tatvas. They are the instruments of thought and action.

The body with its faculties that were created from maya perishes into maya at death. Thus, birth and death are transformation from one to another. This is one of the basic concepts of Saiva Siddhanta referred to as *Satkariyavatham* (nothing comes out of nothing). In other words all things born out of maya will eventually decay and get transformed to maya (energy becomes matter and in turn matter becomes energy).

At the very beginning, the soul is constricted by *anava* and its capabilities to know, act and desire are blocked and cannot be expressed. This is the state of the soul before any birth was taken. This state is called *kevalam*. So God, out of compassion to help the soul, provided a *subtle body* called *puriyattakayam*. The subtle body cannot be seen.

In the beginning, the soul goes into action for the first time (*kevalam)*. Its power to know, act and desire is awakened. This forms the basis for karma. Once the soul accumulates karma, the kevala state is changed and the soul gets a *gross body* for the first time. This state is called *sakalam*. Now, God provides the soul with a physical body, the world and the things of the world for its enjoyment. (Here all 36 tatvas are used). From now on karma and birth follow one after another in a cyclical fashion. On liberation, the soul is free of its bondage and comes closer to God. This state of the soul (free from bondage) is referred to as *suththam*.

The soul must free itself from the three bonds (anava, karma and maya) if it wants to attain salvation. The inherent tendency for

the soul is to tend towards Pasam which binds the soul towards worldly pleasures and prevents it from attaining liberation.

Humans are different from the rest of the living beings on earth in that they possess the sixth sense (the power of reasoning). The purpose of God providing this is to get rid of the ego and liberate the soul by worship and doing good deeds.

To break the cycle of karma and birth and to liberate the soul, Saivism stresses on the need to follow certain basic ethics in life. We have various attributes or qualities (gunas), which make up our psyche. There are three gunas, or attitudes.

Depending upon their relative strengths and combinations, they influence the nature of that person. The three gunas are *sattva, rajas and tamas*.

Sattva: It is a state of harmony and balance. Sattva rules by suppressing rajas and tamas. When goodness and wisdom are present in your whole being - then sattva is ruling. In fact the aim of yoga is to achieve sattva in mind and body. Satvic food includes whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Rajas: Rajas rules by suppressing tamas and sattva gunas. Greed, activity, restlessness, passion, and selfishness are some of the attitudes that arise when rajas is ruling in your life. Rajastic foods include fried and spicy foods and stimulants.

Tamas: Tamas or inertia, binds the spirit by laziness, ignorance and too much sleep. Tamas dominates by suppressing rajas and sattva. People with dominant Tamas wake up late, eat often and drink alcohol all day. They prefer foods such as meat and processed food.

These three gunas exist in various degrees of combination in everyone. People can be more or less dominated by one of the three gunas. The relative strengths and combinations of gunas determine the nature of people and their actions and behaviour. When a person understands these gunas and develops sattva guna in abundance, the path of enlightenment becomes much easier.

The path of enlightenment is divided naturally into four stages:

charya, kriya, yoga, and *jnana.*

Charya literally means "conduct". It is the first stage of religiousness and the foundation for the next three stages. It is worship of Siva through service. This includes attending the temple (lighting lamps, picking flowers, polishing the floors, sweeping, singing the Lord's praise, ringing the bell), performing one's duty to community and family, honouring holy men and respecting elders. This is also called *dasa marga* (see chapter 5).

Kriya is worship of Siva mentally and externally. It includes puja, japa, penance, fasting and scriptural learning, by which our understanding and love of God deepen. This is also called a satputra marga (see chapter 5).

Yoga "union," is the process of uniting with God within oneself, a stage arrived at through perfecting charya and kriya. It is the regular practice of meditation (controlling the mind from thinking of worldly matters), detachment and austerities under the guidance of a guru. This is also referred to as the sakha marga (see chapter 5).

Jnana (means path of knowledge). It is the best and most direct path to liberation. It involves obtaining knowledge through studies of sacred texts and learning from a guru. This guru- sysya (teacher-student) relationship is called Jnana marga or sanmargam (see chapter 5).

Once the soul gets to this stage, the grip of anava (which causes ignorance) is completely weakened and a feeling that all is according to God's Grace develops. This stage is called ***malaparipaham.***

Next, the soul is able to take up good and bad karma, pleasure and pain as equal. This stage is called ***iruvinai oppu.***

Finally, God's grace descends upon the soul. It is called ***Sakthi nipatham.*** Once this state is reached, karma no longer affects the soul (it is absorbed by God Himself). The rest of the Sanchitha karma is burnt by God (so the soul will not be reborn).

As the soul is now free of bondage and has no further need for re-births, it is liberated. This is ***mukthi.***

The Saiva Siddhanta principles that we have looked can be very difficult to understand even for someone with a good knowledge of Saivism. I have tried to present a basic summary of these concepts but you may need further study for better understanding. Please refer to the authoritative texts in Saiva Siddhanta, *Meikanda Sasthras*, written in Tamil (English translations are available).

CHAPTER 9: YOGA AND MEDITATION

The term Yoga, come from a Sanskrit word, means union. Traditionally, yoga is a method for joining the individual soul with God. It is a system of exercises aimed to promote the control of body and mind. These exercises were part of the Saiva spiritual practice for thousands of years, as confirmed by the archaeological find of a seal showing a seated human figure with legs in the Yoga position (see chapter 1), considered as a prototype of the Saiva God Siva (as Yogeswara). The ultimate aim of these practices is liberating the soul by freeing it from its bondage.

Yoga is the third of the four successive stages (margas) of purification and enlightenment in Saiva Siddhanta. These are - chariya, kriya, yoga and jnana (as explained in chapter 8). There are four main types of yoga. They are karma yoga (yoga of action), bhakti yoga (yoga of devotion), jnana joga (yoga of knowledge) and raja yoga. Raja yoga is concerned principally with the cultivation of the mind using meditation.

Hatha yoga was introduced in the 15th century AD. What most people in the western world refer to as Yoga is actually Hatha Yoga. It is the branch of yoga which concentrates on physical health and mental well-being. It uses bodily postures (*asanas*), breathing techniques (*pranayama* - prana means life force and ayama means to control), and meditation (*dhyana*) with the goal of bringing about a sound, healthy body and a clear, peaceful mind. Hatha yoga is the most widely practised form of yoga outside India. It follows the same principles as the raja yoga of Patanjali. Patanjali who lived in the 2nd century BC is the compiler of the yoga Sutras.

The yoga sutras of Patanjali are a foundational text of yoga. Generally the yoga process involves eight stages. The first two stages (*yama and niyama*) are ethical preparations such as abstinence from violence, lying and theft as well as cleanliness, and devotion to God. The next two stages (*asana and pranayama*) are physical

preparations such as posture of the body during meditation and control of breathing. These preparations condition the body to make it supple, flexible, and healthy. This part of yoga is the one that is popularised in the West. The fifth stage (*pratyahara*) involves control of the mind and senses to withdraw from outward objects. The next stage (*dharana*) is concentration, during which the mind is held steadily to the contemplation of a single idea or an object until it is emptied of all else. The remaining stages (*meditation and samadhi*) will ultimately lead to release from the cycle of rebirth. Samadhi is the stage of super consciousness (soul-liberation).

This brings us to the next subject: *meditation*. Meditation is a practice of focussing one's mind for a period of time for a specific purpose. The original goal of meditation was spiritual enlightenment and liberation of the soul (mukthi). Nowadays the goals of meditation are variable: anything from spiritual enlightenment to the transformation of attitudes to achieving better health.

Meditation may serve simply as a means of relaxation from a busy daily routine, as a technique for cultivating mental discipline or as a means of gaining insight into the nature of reality. Many people report improved concentration, awareness, self-discipline and composure through meditation. Another term that explains the term meditation well is *contemplation.*

Yoga as a means to enlightenment is central to Saivism (Hinduism). This was later taken up by the offshoots of Saivism: Buddhism and Jainism. Now, many religions of the world include yoga as part of their spiritual practises for enlightenment.

Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini in Sanskrit means "coiling like a snake". Kundalini (Shakthi) is the spiritual force (life force). In its dormant stage it lies at the base of the spine between the root of the reproductive organ and anus, coiled like a snake (of three and a half inch coils). It is also called "serpent power".

The astral tubes or channels through which the energies of the subtle body are said to flow are referred to as *Nadi* (meaning

channels or veins in Sanskrit). These Yoga nadis are not the ordinary nerves, arteries and veins. All the nadis (channels) spring up from the *Kanda* (it is the shape of an egg, covered with membranes, and lies just above the Muladhara chakra). Out of the innumerable nadis, fourteen are said to be important.

Ida (moon), *Pingala* (sun) and *Sushumna* are the most important of the fourteen nadis and *Sushumna* is the chief nadi. *Ida* and *Pingala* nadis run along the two sides of the spinal column and connect the loins and throat. The *Sushumna* runs within the spinal column from the Mulathara *chakra* and moves upwards through other power centres to the top of the head (*Sahasrara* - see figure 20).

The aim of this Yoga is to arouse "the serpent power" of the Kundalini to rise upward, through the *sushumna,* piercing the various centres until reaching the crown of the head called Sahasrara (seventh chakra) resulting in union with God (Samadhi). On its way upwards, it is believed to activate each chakra it goes through. Each chakra is said to contain special characteristics. The chakras are any of the nerve plexus or centres of force and consciousness located within the inner body of humans.

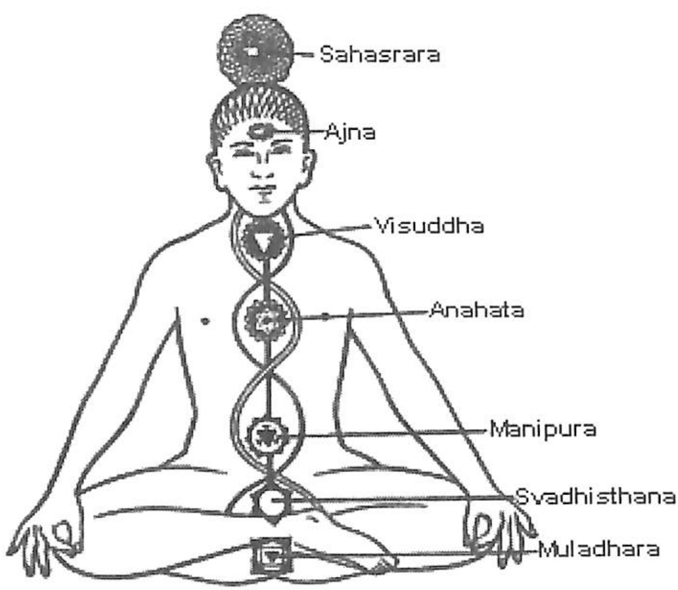


Fig.20. Seven Chakras

Following are the chakras through which the Kundalini rises through meditative exercises. They are seven in number.

1. Muladhara - located in the region between the root of the reproductive organ and anus.
2. Swadhisthana - located in the groin, in the genital region.
3. Manipura - located in the umbilical area.
4. Anahata - located in the heart.
5. Vishuddha - located in the throat.
6. Ajna located in the fore head between the two eye brows.
7. Sahasrara - is the master chakra that controls all the others, located on the top of the head where the head bones fuse.

"It is not considered wise to engage in any of these practices without the guidance of a good teacher or without thorough psychological preparation and education in yoga.

The psychic powers thus obtained can make the person achieve levitation, transcend the limits of space and time and be in several places or times at once, or can acquire the powers and qualities of anything upon which he or she chooses to concentrate. The chief aim of Yoga, of course, is not to achieve these abilities (these are by-products) but to experience utter and complete freedom of the self from earthly bonds" (David S. Noss - 12).

Thirumanthiram and Siva yoga

Thirumanthiram is included as the tenth Thirumurai in our Saiva scriptures (Panniru Thirumurai). It is written by Saint Thirumular who was a great mystic and Yogi. Thirumanthiram has more than 3000 verses and has been considered to be the earliest text on Saiva Siddhanta.

Thirumular was a contemporary of Patanjali (who wrote the original Yoga sutras) and explained yoga in the light of Saiva Siddhanta. His considered opinion was that spiritual development and attainment of Moksha are only possible during our lifetimes, and therefore if one was able to lengthen his lifespan, he could gain time

to attain the goal. Yoga is a sure way for lengthening the lifespan for attaining spiritual bliss and freedom from worldly bonds.

Again, it is a very difficult subject to understand, especially some aspects of Yoga such as the Kundalini Yoga. This is intended more as a summary, but requires further study for better understanding. Please refer to the authoritative books on "Yoga and meditation". I have included some in the reference section.

CHAPTER 10: SOME OF THE PURANIC STORIES THAT ARE FREQUENTLY SEEN IN THIRUMURAI

As explained in Chapter 2, the *Puranas* illustrate certain religious truths through vivid stories dealing with interactions between deities, Devas, Asuras and humans. The following are a few of the stories that are seen frequently in Thirumurai.

1. "Tripura" Samkara (Destruction of the three fortresses of the Tripura asuras)

Tripura denotes three cities of anava, karma and maya. It has a puranic story associated with it. Three brothers named Tarakaksha, Kamalaksha and Vidyunmali made severe penance towards Lord Brahma and received three impregnable and indestructible flying fortresses, made of gold, silver and iron. When Brahma bestowed on them these fortresses, he stated that the fortresses could only be destroyed by a single arrow (for which they had to be lined up). The asuras were happy that the cities would never be in danger as they would never be in a single line except for a fleeting few seconds every thousand years when the Nakshatra (star) Pushya (Poosam in Tamil) would be in conjunction with the moon.

The three fortresses were located separately on earth, sky and heaven. Having received their boons (as usual with all asuras) they started to torment Sages and Devas and inflicted severe cruelty on everyone in the three worlds. *The Devas went to Lord Siva and appealed to him to save them from these demons. They described to Him their sufferings at the hands of these asuras (demons) of the "Tripura". (On hearing their sufferings, Lord Siva shed tears. Rudraksha beads represent the tears shed by Lord Siva - See Chapter 6).*

Siva promised to help them and ordered a chariot be built for him to battle the three demons on the day the three cities were aligned. This chariot was different from the usual ones, as the chariot itself was made of earth and the wheels were made of the sun and moon.

Brahma was holding the reins, Mount Meru was the bow, Vishnu was the arrow, Agni was the tip of the arrow, Vayu was the inside feathers on the rear of the arrow, and all the Devas had their own places to form the chariot. When the time arrived for Siva to shoot the arrow the Devas were overjoyed by the fact that the Tripura was going to be destroyed because of them as they were part of the war chariot. Siva, the all knowing, laughed (at the Devas' egos) and the tripuras were burned immediately.

What the Devas did not realise was that Lord Siva could have destroyed those fortresses by Icha Sakthi alone (by willing to do something).

There are many variations to this story. One of them is that after the chariot was made, Lord Siva put his foot up to get on the chariot and it fell apart. This was because he did not pray to Lord Ganesha (remover of all obstacles) before he was about to start his fight against the Tripura asuras. It is customary that everyone should pray to Ganesha before starting anything (this is the boon given to Vigneswara by Lord Siva Himself). When this happened Lord Siva laughed and the Tripuras were burnt to ashes.

After destroying the fortresses the three brothers repented for their actions and begged for redemption from the Lord. Siva, the all-forgiving, made two of the brothers the gatekeepers to his abode at mount Kailash and appointed the third one to play drums during his cosmic dance.

When we talk of *'Tripura Samkara" we should understand that it is a puranic story.* The aim of these stories is to help people to understand the Saiva religion and its significance. Saint Thirumular in his book Thirumanthiram (tenth Thirumurai) talks of this story as "Fools believe that the *Tripua Samkara is about the destruction of three fortresses. In reality it is the destruction of three malas (impurities) anava, karma and maya from the souls by the Lord". As you can see, these stories were narrated by Rishis to explain serious Saiva Siddhanta facts in a simplified form for the average person to understand.*

2. How Brahma and Vishnu went looking for the top and bottom of a fiery mountain

The story behind the lack of worship of Brahma relates back to a dispute between Vishnu and Brahma as to who was the superior of the two. Siva appeared as a fiery mountain between them and challenged them to find the beginning and end of the mountain. Whoever found it first would be the superior one. Vishnu was directed to find the foot of the mountain and Brahma the top of the mountain. Vishnu took the form of a wild boar and dug downwards to see the foot while Brahma took the form of a swan and flew up to see the top. Neither could find their appointed destination. Vishnu returned to Siva, bowed down before him and admitted that he could not find the foot of the mountain.

Brahma did not give up so easily. As he was going up, he saw two flowers, dear to Siva, falling from his head. His ego forced him to ask the flowers to bear false witness to Brahma's finding top of the mountain. When Brahma told his tale, Siva, the all-knowing, was angered by his lie and cursed him that no being in the three worlds would worship him and he would not have any temple on the earth. In addition, the two flowers that lied for Brahma are no longer used for worship.

The day when the fiery mountain appeared is celebrated as *Maha **Sivarathiri*** by Saivites (See Chapter 11 for more on this). In Thirugnanasambandar's Thevarams, every ninth hymn in each pathigam refers to this story.

3. The Story of how the Devas and asuras churned the ocean of milk for the nectar of life and immortality (amirtham)

The Devas and Asuras once joined forces and churned the ocean of milk to get Amirtham (the nectar of life and immortality). As you know, Devas and Asuras are usually opposed to each other, but when they realised there was a chance for immortality they buried their differences to churn the ocean of milk.

They used Mount Mandara as a churning stick and the serpent Vasuki as a churning rope. Fourteen different objects came out of the ocean of milk including Kamathenu (the cow that could give anything

out of its udders), Katpagatharu (the plant that could provide any fruits), the moon, the Elephant Airavatham and Lakshmi. Lord Vishnu took Lakshmi as his wife and Indra (King of Devas) took Airavatham as the Royal Elephant.

At one point the serpent Vasuki started to vomit poison (Hala hala - the name of the poison). The poison started to kill both devas and asuras. They surrendered to Lord Siva who is ever compassionate and always engaged in removing fear from his devotees. Lord Siva took the poison in his mouth. His consort, Parvathi held his throat so the poison could not go down the throat. The poison stayed there and turned his throat blue. This story thus signifies his infinite grace in protecting those who surrender to him. This gave Siva the name Nilakanda, meaning "Blue necked".

4. How the river Gangai was brought down to earth from the Heavens

The River Gangai (Ganges River) flowing from Lord Siva's lock of hair is explained mythologically.

King Bhagiratha's 60,000 ancestors were burnt to ashes by the Sage Kapila, seven generations previously, and lay in the netherworld. The sage had told King Bhagiratha that the only way that their souls could be liberated was by bringing the river Gangai from the heavens to purify the ashes.

King Bhagiratha therefore prayed to Brahma (because Gangai was in Brahma loga and one needs the permission of Brahma to bring it to earth) to allow the river to descend from the heavens to the earth. To protect the earth from the torrent of waters of Gangai, Bhagiratha made penance to please Lord Siva who imprisoned the river in his lock of hair and released her slowly for the people of the world.

5. The Story of how Ravana tried to lift Mount Kailash

Ravana (the demon king of Lanka) once tried to lift up Lord Siva's abode, the holy Mount Kailash. To prevent this, Lord Siva pressed his big toe down and the mighty Ravana was crushed under the weight of the mountain for a thousand years.

The sage Naradha, while passing, saw his predicament and told him to play Sama Gana (singing hymns of Rig Veda) because Lord Siva is also referred to as "Sama Ganan" (He who loves Sama Gana music).

The ten headed asura took one of his spines and used it as veena (musical instrument). He played Sama Gana and pleaded for mercy. Pleased by the music, Lord Siva lifted his toe and released Ravana from underneath the mountain. Pressing his toe Lord Siva crushed Ravana's ego and he begged for forgiveness from the Lord. All forgiving, the Lord also gave him long life and a sword called 'Chandrahaasam' that could be used only once.

This sword he used to cut down the wings of Sadayu (son of the mythical bird Garuda who is the vahana of Lord Krishna) when he tried to stop him from abducting Rama's wife Sitha to Lanka (refer Ramayana).

In Thirugnanasambandar's pathigams, every eighth hymn refers to this story.

6. How Vishnu acquired the Chakkarayutham (weapon)

Vishnu was once praying to Lord Siva, using a thousand lotus flowers, placing them one by one at his feet. When he reached 999 he found the 1000th flower missing. Without any hesitation, he plucked his eye out and placed it at the Lord's feet as though it was the thousandth flower. Pleased with his devotion Lord Siva gave Vishnu the Chakkaram (discus-like weapon) named Sudarshna. Lord Siva had used this weapon to kill a demon named Jalantharasuran. At the height of the fight, Siva drew a chakkaram with his big toe on the ground, lifting it off the ground and throwing it at him, killing him instantly. Siva gave such a powerful weapon to Vishnu for his supreme devotion in giving his own eye for the missing flower.

Vishnu has always had a Conch (named Panchacanyam) in one hand. Having been given the Discus by Lord Siva, Vishnu carried it in his other hand. From that day forth, Vishnu was referred to as "Sanku Chakkarathaari" meaning god who carries Conch (Sanku in Tamil) in one hand and Discus (chakkaram in Tamil) in the other.

7. Story of Markandeyar

Once there was a great rishi named Mrikandu who lived with his wife Marudavati. For a long time they had no children. Mrikandu made penance to Lord Siva who appeared before him and asked whether they would like to have many children with no intelligence who would live for a long time or one child with great intelligence but who would live for only sixteen years. The sage chose to have one intelligent child and soon his wife gave birth to a son. They named him Markandeyar (meaning the son of Mrikandu). He was so intelligent that he easily learnt the Vedas and all the sastras that are needed for a Brahmin. He was very handsome and well liked by everyone. As he was nearing his sixteenth birthday his parents became very worried. When Markandeyar asked his parents what was wrong, they told him that Lord Siva had said he would die soon.

He reassured his parents and prayed to Lord Siva daily. When he reached his sixteenth birthday (the day he was supposed to die) he made a Sivalingam at the nearby seashore and continued his prayers all day. Yama, the Lord of death is depicted as one with black skin riding a water buffalo and carrying a loop of rope in his left hand with which he pulls the soul out of the body. When he arrived to take his soul Markandeyar clung to the Sivalingam and asked Lord Siva to protect him from Yama.

Yama threw his rope round his neck, however in doing so the noose encircled the Sivalingam too. Lord Siva was enraged by the fact that Yama had the audacity to encircle the Sivalingam with his noose (Lord Siva is beyond death and time). Lord Siva appeared out of the Sivalingam in all his fury, kicked Yama in his chest and killed him with his trident to protect his devotee.

Lord Siva saved Markandeyar from his death and blessed him to be sixteen forever. He became a great rishi like his father and lived a long and fruitful life (many believe that he is still alive!)

Later, at the request of the Devas, Lord Siva resurrected Yama and told him that in future Siva devotees are for ever to be spared from his noose.

CHAPTER 11: TAMIL-SAIVA FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS

There is such a wide array of festivals celebrated in Saivism that every day of the year there will be a festival celebrated in some part of Sri Lanka or India. These festivals relate to mythological and celestial events, such as the birthdays of Gods, famous victories of Gods over Asuras, Tamil New Year and Deepavali. In addition, of course, individual families also celebrate events such as marriages, deaths and anniversaries.

Every town and village in Sri Lanka and India has many temples. Each of these temples has an annual festival (Mahotsavam) lasting 10-15 days (in some cases 25 days – as in the Nallur Muruga temple in Sri Lanka). These festivals are often all day and night events. The festival begins with the flag hoisting ceremony on the first day. Following special pujas, the deities are mounted on various specific vahanas (vehicles) of animals and birds (for example Lord Ganesh rides on a mouse, Muruga rides on a peacock) or specially constructed carriers called *Sapparam*. These are then taken out in a procession around the temple prakaras.

The climax of these festivals is the chariot festival (*Ther Thiruvila*) that takes place on the 9th, 14th or 24th day of the festival. Deities are placed on the elaborately decorated Ther and devotees pull it by ropes around the outer prahara of the temple.

The final day is called the water-cutting ceremony (theertham) for which the deity is taken in procession to a pond (or a seaside or riverside if one is available in the vicinity), amid chanting of religious hymns by devotees. The chief priest of the temple performs religious rites standing in the water and pours holy water on the deity. Thereafter the devotees take a ritual bath. A dip in the 'theertham' during this time is considered to absolve one of all sins.

Usually hundreds and thousands of people attend these festivals; often people come from other towns and cities as well. Closer to

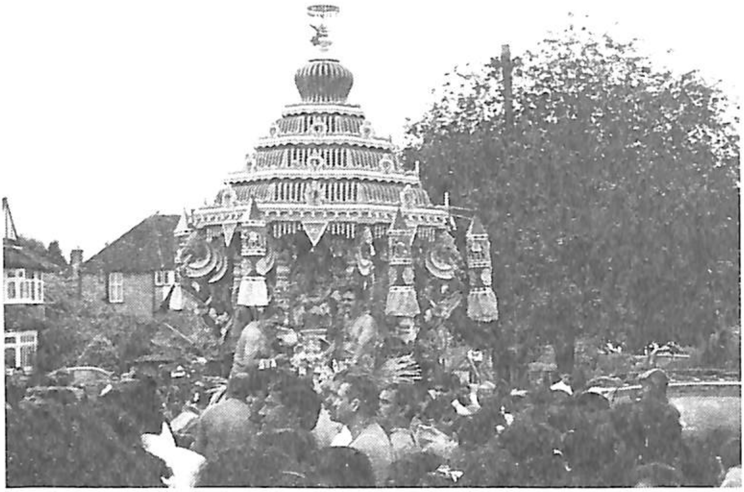


Fig.21. Ther

most big temples there are lodges providing accommodation and free meals for pilgrims visiting from other towns. In the surroundings of the temples there are shops and entertainment for youngsters. During these festivals many people fast, usually taking only one vegetarian meal a day. A person could spend half his life attending festivities in his own and surrounding villages or towns. He could also go on pilgrimages to distant temples.

Because the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora has been scattered across the globe (with concentrations in Canada, UK, Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand) there have been Tamil Saiva Temples built in many different countries around the world.

Specific Festivals

Thai Pongal

Thai Pongal is celebrated on the first day of the month of Thai of the Tamil calendar. The day normally falls between the 12th and 15th day of January in the Christian calendar. It has astronomical significance: it marks the beginning of *uttarayana*, the Sun's movement northward (uttar in Sanskrit means north) for a six month period. In Saivism, uttarayana is considered auspicious, as opposed

to dakshinayana (the southern movement of the sun). All important events are scheduled during this six month period.

The Tamil festival of Thai Pongal is a thanks-giving ceremony celebrated by farmers. In this ceremony they thank the spirits of nature, the sun and their livestock for their assistance in providing a successful harvest. The festival is at least 1000 years old although some believe it may be even more than 2000 years old.

Pongal in Tamil means "boiling over" or "spilling over". The muttam in front of the house (front courtyard) is prepared for this ceremonious cooking of *Pongal.* A flat square pitch is made and decorated with kolam (See below). A fire wood hearth is set up using three bricks. The cooking begins by putting a clay pot with water and milk on the hearth. A senior member of the family conducts the cooking and the rest of the family assists them or watches the event. When the milky water is boiled and 'spills over', a senior member of the family (man) ceremoniously puts three handful of rice in first. They are followed by other members of the family. The act of boiling over of milk in the clay pot is considered to denote future prosperity for the family.

When the meal (pongal with curries) is ready, it is first put on a banana leaf and offered to the Sun, in the court yard with a prayer, to thank him for providing prosperity. The pongal is later served to the people present in the house for the ceremony.

Mattu Pongal

Mattu Pongal usually takes place on the day after the Thai pongal. It is devoted to thanksgiving to cattle. The farmers pay great attention to the animals which have ploughed the fields and drawn the carts throughout the year. To show his gratitude for their service the animals are bathed, their horns are painted in multicolour and their foreheads are smeared with turmeric and kunkumam. Their necks are adorned with colourful garlands. Pongal is prepared in front of the cattle shed and offered to them in plenty.

Tamil - Hindu New Year *(Varusha Pirappu)*

The Tamil new year generally falls on or around the 14th of April

(in some years it falls on 13th of April). The Tamil Yearly calendar follows a sixty year cycle. After the completion of sixty years, the calendar starts again with the first year. Most of the names are in Sanskrit – for example 2011 - 2012 AD (commencing on 14th of April 2011) is called *Kara* Varusham. The next *Kara* Varusham will occur in 2071 AD.

The New Year is preceded by at least two weeks of preparations, devoted largely to shopping and the making of a variety of sweets. Schools (in Sri Lanka) have their holidays during the month of April, so children often help their mothers in and around home, getting the household ready for the New Year's day.

Early in the morning on New Year's Day, Saivites in Sri Lanka have their ritual baths with "maruthu-neer" applied on the heads. It is clear water boiled with herbs, selected flowers, leaves and other ingredients made by priests in temples. This is available in most local temples on that day. Saivites wear new clothes and go to their nearest temples with offerings. Lord Ganesha is the main deity who is worshipped at New Year. He is offered a tray with flowers, fruits, coconuts, betel leaves and areca-nuts, as well as some food. This is called *archanai*.

In the afternoon, people may go to the temple for prayers. In many towns Lord Ganesha's chariot festival (Ther Thiruvila) takes place on that day. The following three to five days are spent visiting various relatives, friends and exchanging New Year greetings. Presents given include money, fruits, betel leaves and areca nuts. Gifts are also given to the postman, council workers, domestic workers and others.

Deepavali

Deepavali is celebrated usually either at the end of October or the beginning of November. People take an oil bath in the morning and wear new clothes. This symbolic purification rite marks a new beginning. They light fireworks which are regarded as the effigies of Narakasura who was killed on this day.

(In Hindu mythology Narakasura was the son of goddess Bhudevi (Bhumi - Earth mother). As usual once an asura receives a boon, he

begins to torment humans and Devas. Narakasura was no exception. At the request of the Devas, Lord Krishna killed Narakasura on this day. The asura requested that his death anniversary should be celebrated by all people on earth.

Festivities for the day include offering prayers to Gods at temples or at home, feasting on traditional foods and visiting friends and relatives.

In North India thousands of flickering oil lamps are lit to celebrate the return of Rama after his period of exile. Both these traditions denote the triumph of good over evil. It is also called the festival of lights. This should not be confused with *Thirukarthigai (*See below*).*

Other Fasts and Festivals

There are so many religious festivals and fasts (virathams) observed by Saivites that it is not possible to write about all of them here. So I will list a few and give more details for some of the important ones:

Paurnami Viratham:(It is also referred to as 'Paruvam')

'Paurnami viratham' is a fast that is observed on every full moon day. On this day, the fast is undertaken in remembrance of departed mothers. It is a day of worship and of abstinence from meat and fish. ***Chithra Pournami,*** the full moon day of Chithrai (April) month, has a special significance for the remembrance, as this day is celebrated in honour of ***Chitra Gupta*** who is the record keeper of Yama. He maintains good and bad deeds of each person in this world, and we are rewarded or punished accordingly in the afterlife, by Yama.

Amavasai Viratham

This is observed on every new moon day. As above, a fast is undertaken in remembrance of departed fathers. Again it is a day of worship and of abstinence from meat and fish. *Adi Amavasai* occurring once a year in July – August has a special significance. This is the month of transformation as it is the first new moon of Dakshinayana (southern travel of the sun). Dakshinayana is considered to be the night time for celestial beings (one human year is one day for Devas).

Maha Sivarathiri Viratham

Maha **Sivarathiri** is a festival day devoted to Lord Siva, celebrated on the amavaasai (new moon) day in the month of February. It is customary to remain awake that night, worshipping throughout the night. This worship takes the form of periodic pujas, singing in praise of Lord Siva and listening to religious discourses interpreting the legends associated with the festival. Devotees bathe at sunrise, in the sea, river or any other holy water source. After prayer the devotees break the fast, but do not sleep until sunset or the usual time of sleep.

The background legend to **Sivarathiri** is described in Chapter 10 - 2 under '*How Brahma and Vishnu went looking for the top and bottom of a fiery mountain*'.

Vinayakar Chaturthi

The birthday of Lord Ganesha, the son of Siva and Parvathi, is celebrated on the 4th day of the new moon in the month of Aavani (August-September). The celebrations are done both at home and in temples. Chaturthi happens every month; but the one that occurs in August-September is the one that is celebrated widely throughout the Saiva/Hindu world.

Navarathiri Viratham: (nine nights of festival)

Navarathri is the festival of worship of the Goddess Shakthi. It is celebrated around Sept-Oct of each year. During this period, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi are worshipped three days each as three different manifestations of Shakthi. For the first three nights, Durga, the Goddess of strength, is worshipped; the second three nights, Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, is worshipped; and the last three nights, Saraswathi, Goddess of learning is worshipped. The tenth day is called Vijayadashami. On Vijayadashami, people worship books, weapons, tools and implements of their trade.

Again, legend has it that Navarathiri symbolises the triumph of good over evil. The Goddess fought the Demon 'Mahishashura' over nine days and nights and destroyed him on the tenth day. This is celebrated in temples by cutting a young plantain tree on the last day.

It is customary in India to display a "**Golu**". This is an exhibition of various dolls and figurines. Generally, when people come to a person's house to see the **Golu**, they are given prasadam, kunkumum and often a small bag of gifts. These are only given to girls and married women. Widows are given gifts but not kunkumum as they do not wear it after their husbands have passed away.

Skandha Sashti

This starts the day after Deepavali and lasts for six days. This fast is performed for Lord Muruga (also referred to as Skandan) in the month of Aippasi (Oct 15 - Nov 15). It is celebrated in Saiva temples all over Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu (now of course, all around the world), especially in temples dedicated to Lord Muruga. Skanda Sashti commemorates the destruction of evil by Lord Muruga, son of Siva, and is celebrated in most temples with the re-enactment of the killing of the demon king Soorapathman (called Soora Samhaaram).

Thirukarthigai

The Karthigai Nakshatram (star) is of great importance to Lord Muruga, as it is considered his birth star. Occurring in the month of Karthigai (November-December), Hindus, especially Saivites, decorate their homes and altars with little oil lamps to celebrate this day. The lamps are lit at various places inside and outside the house. The lamps denote the removal of darkness (ignorance) and enhancing of light (intelligence).

In south India at Thiruvannamalai temple, Lord Siva's Agni Sthalam, (see chapter 3, under Natarajah) the celebration is most significant. Therefore it is also referred to as 'Thiruvannaamalai Deepam' (As stated earlier, this should not be confused with Deepavali!).

Thiruvathirai

This is celebrated in the Tamil month of Markali (mid December to mid January) and is associated with Lord Siva. There are 27 Nakshatras (stars), which are associated with Hindu astrology. Only two out of twenty-seven stars are honoured with the title "Thiru". They are Athirai and Onam, which are assigned to Lord Siva and

Lord Vishnu, respectively. Saivites assigned a birthday for Lord Siva (who has no beginning or an end!) and he is referred to as "The Lord of Athirai."

The whole month of Markali is considered a month for penance and prayer. No social celebrations are held during this month. *Thiruvempavai* is the most important 10 days (falls between second half of December and first half of January) celebrated in the name of Lord Siva in every Siva temple. Thiruvempavai (a part of the Thiruvasakam hymn) is sung every day of the 10 days and this is one of the most important festivals at Chidambaram (the Koyil –see chapter 3). On the 10^{th} morning the Natarajah has Abhisekam and is followed by *Arudhra Darshan,* the cosmic dance of Lord Siva which is enacted on the day.

CHAPTER 12: RITUALS AT HOME

There are many rituals and practices as well as sacraments (religious ceremonies) in a Saivite's life. Other than the daily pujas at home, 'rites of passage rituals' (i.e. from birth to death) are the most common rituals performed by Saivites at home. The earliest of these rituals is the ceremonies that may be performed during pregnancy to ensure a healthy mother and child (in India the "Valaikappu" ceremony is the most popular ceremony during pregnancy. This is held in the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy, when the pregnant woman is presented with new sets of glass bangles and the sound of these bangles is supposed to reach the womb - they do). For some reason, this is done by Indian Tamils but not by Sri Lankan Tamils. The final 'rite of passage' is of course, death.

Preparations for the Rituals

Preparation for any rituals at home involves sweeping of the venue where the ritual is to be conducted and spraying the area with turmeric water (turmeric is a well known antiseptic that has been used in Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years). Then the area where the function is to take place is decorated appropriately. Decorations are done with mango leaves and 'Thoranam' (See below).

A Kolam is drawn on the floor and at the entrance to the venue. Banana plants are used to decorate the entranceways (See below for more details).

Mango leaves are considered auspicious objects. The mango leaves are also used as 'thoranams' with their stem pinned forwards for auspicious occasions and backwards for inauspicious occasions. They are often tied at the entrance of a hall or a house wherever there is an auspicious function. They are also used in niraikudams (See below) and as spoons to add ghee into the sacred fire or to spray holy water.

"The mango leaves are tied at the entrance of a hall where there

is a function, because our ancestors knew that a congregation of tens of people resulted in a large release of CO_2 in a confined area. The leaves have the ability to absorb CO_2 and infuse fresh oxygen. And, why only mango leaves? Because only mango leaves have the ability to absorb CO_2, even after they are removed from the parent tree" (*Chennaikaran* - 13).

Kolam is a decorative artwork drawn on the floor at the entrance and in some instances at the place of the actual ritual itself. It is drawn using white roasted rice flour. The reason for using rice flour is that once the function is over small creatures like ants can feed on this.

It is traditional to use large size kolams in front of houses throughout the Tamil month of "Markali" (mid December to mid January). The Kolam is drawn very early in the morning by women of the household. This is still very much a part of life in many villages and small towns of Tamil Nadu and in Sri Lanka, and to a much lesser extent in big cities.

Banana plants are placed one on each side of the entranceways. "Niraikudam" and "thoranam" (See below) also adorn the entrance during these occasions. The "Kathali valai" variety of banana plant is used for auspicious occasions and "saambal valai" a different variety of banana (used mainly for cooking) is used for inauspicious occasions. I believe the reason is possibly that the kathali variety of banana is sweet and the sambal variety is sour as appropriate for the respective occasions.

Every part of the banana plant is used for food: the stem, flower, green plantain and ripe fruit .The leaves are used as 'plates' to eat, as a receptacle after stitching the sides together with tooth picks (called 'thonnai' in Tamil) and as a base for niraikudam. The string (obtained from dry banana stems) is used to bind flowers together into garlands and the inner cover of the stems are used as protective covers for garlands so that they can be transported to great distances fresh and intact. You can't kill the banana plant easily. If you cut the tree the young shoots from its base will grow to be a tree again. The philosophy of using such a tree during religious rituals is to help us realise that we should live our lives like that of the banana tree (to be

helpful and useful to others). It is also to bless us to live a long life like the banana tree.

Thoranam is made out of tender coconut palm leaves. "Thoranam" with five folds are used for auspicious occasions with their tips pointing downwards (for Devas to come down from 'heavens') and three fold ones are used for inauspicious occasions with their tips pointing upwards (for asuras to go upwards).

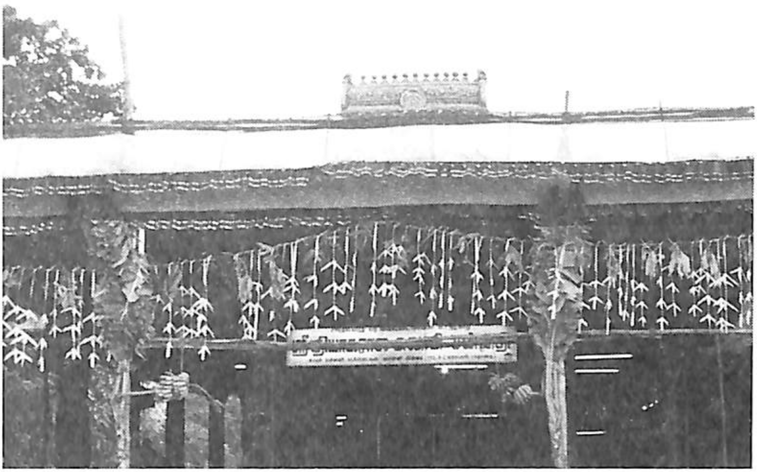


Fig.22. Banana Plants and Thoranams

Niraikudam: A copper or silver pot (kudam) is filled with water and a coconut is placed to cover the mouth of the pot. Five, seven or nine mango leaves are arranged (depending on the size of the pot) to lie in between the coconut and the rim of the pot. Then the water filled pot is usually placed on a banana leaf ("Thalai vaalai ilai" in Tamil) with its tip pointing east or north with some *paddy* or rice spread over the leaf to act as a base to steady the pot (the whole grain, paddy, is preferable to husked grain like rice). It can also be placed on a copper or silver plate (when the banana leaf is not available as in foreign countries) containing some paddy or rice. On many occasions, especially during temple rituals, the 'kudam' is covered with layers of string and a silk shawl is placed over it. Gold and silver coins are placed inside the water.

The Niraikudam is generally decorated with flowers. It is usually

placed between two traditional lamps ('kuththu vilakku') and bananas; betel leaves, areca nuts are often placed on a tray by its side. For auspicious occasions a tray containing Holy ash (Thiruneeru), santhanam, kunkumam and sugar candy are also placed on a separate tray (see fig.23).

The significance of the niraikudam is illustrated as follows: Niraikudam is a representation of Lord Siva, the kudam is his body, mango leaves are his hair, water in the pot is his blood, the strings covering the pot represents the blood vessels and nerves and silk shawl represents the skin of Siva. The coins are to represent his bones.



Fig.23. Niraikudam

On many occasions Vinayakar is also placed by the side of the niraikudam. Vinayakar is invoked at the beginning of all ritualistic worship, as he is the destroyer of all obstacles. Vinayakar is made out of cow dung, wet turmeric powder or sandalwood paste in the shape of a cone and a few sticks of grass (Arukampul which has a long life) are placed on top of the cone.

The reason for the decorations during these rituals is that "the entrances are transition spaces between two opposing domains, in common terms in and out, private and public. According to Saiva beliefs the attributes of these opposing domains include pure and polluted, the space where favourable spirits and deities like to reside and the space where they like to evade.

The entrances are one mere step away from either of these spaces and need continuous sanctification to prevent unfavourable and evil spirits entering the house. It is believed that such protection can be achieved through certain practices which symbolically invoke Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity or other auspicious symbols at the entrances" (R. Mayooranathan - 14)

'Rites of passage' rituals

"Sacraments are performed to celebrate and sanctify life's crucial junctures, inform family and community and secure inner-world blessings. *Here are eight of the essential rites (Namakarana, Anna Prasana, Karnavedha, Chundukarana, Vidyarambha, Upanayana, Vivaha and Anthyeshti).* Other rites honour coming of age, the stages of child - bearing and attaining the wisdom years". (15)

1. Name giving ceremony (Namakarana)

This is the first real ceremony performed for the child after birth. The ceremony is carried out either in the home or the temple 11 - 41 days after birth. The priest offers prayers and blesses the child. Then the baby is placed on the father's lap who leans towards the baby and whispers the auspicious new name into infant's right ear. Usually many relatives are in attendance for the function. They bless the child and touch some honey or sugar on its lips. They often partake in a meal after the function.

2. Soru uuddal (Annaprasana)

This is the feeding of cooked rice, that is, solid food to a child for the first time. It is usually carried out at around six months of age. It is called "soru uuddal" in Tamil (Annaprasana is Sanskrit). The baby's father gives cooked sweet rice to the child using a gold ring. Following this, other family members give a small amount of rice and bless the child.

3. Kaadhu Kutthal- Ear-Piercing (Karnavedha)

This is usually carried out on the child's first birthday; the baby is made to sit on the maternal uncle's lap during the ritual. It can be performed at a temple or at home. A goldsmith is invited to do the piercing following a prayer. This ritual was performed for children of both sexes. Now it is performed mainly on female children.

4. Mudi Irakkuthal (Chundakarana)

This refers to the shaving of the baby's hair for the first time. It can either be done at home or in a temple depending on the wishes and convenience of the parents. Many carry this out in popular temples such as Palani and Thiruppathy in India or Kathirgamum in Sri Lanka. It is usually carried out at approximately one year of age. First a barber fully shaves the baby's head. After a holy bath, the head is smeared with sandalwood paste and a priest conducts prayers and blesses the child. As in many Saiva rituals, the hair of the baby at the time of birth was considered contaminated with blood and other body fluids. By removing this "dirty" hair and conducting prayers, the child is 'purified'.

5. Eadu Thuvakkal (Vidyarambha)

This marks the commencement of education. When the child is ready to go to school or when the child is ready to learn, a vidhyarambha is carried out. This is usually performed in a temple in front of a priest or an elder in the community. Following prayers to God, the guru will initiate the child by scribing the first letter of the alphabet in a tray of unbroken, uncooked saffron rice. This is also carried out at an auspicious time such as during Navarathri, on the last day called Vijayathasami (See Chapter 11).

6. Marriage ceremony (Vivaha)

(See Chapter 13)

7. Funerals (Anthyeshti)

Even though funerals are sad occasions in a Saiva calendar, this needs to be presented along with other rituals. This is the last of the rites of passage rituals. According to Saiva Siddhanta death is only a single stop in the long journey of the soul. Soon after the death of a person, various rituals may take place around the dead body:

- the deceased is normally dressed in appropriate clothes - Men are usually dressed in their bridegroom's attire (Silk Versti, salvai and Shirt -Tamil costume) and women are usually dressed in a wedding sari (Kurai) or white sari (for purity) if widowed.
- a lamp is placed by the head of the body – To guide the soul through the dark passages on its way to "the other world".
- Prayers and hymns are sung.

Funerals are usually conducted by a (Saiva) priest and by the sons of the person who has died (See below).

Saivites cremate their dead, believing that the burning of a dead body signifies the release of the soul from its earthly existence. As there are so many ceremonies involved with cremation and after, it is only possible for those who have children or a family to carry out these ceremonies. Hence, the custom of burying the bodies of children and sanniyasins (those who renounced the worldly activities in favour of spiritual life) started.

The standard cremation ceremony begins with the ritual cleansing, dressing and adorning of the body. The body is then carried to the cremation ground.

How the cremation takes place depends on where this happens. In villages (and sometimes even in towns) a funeral pyre is set up in a nominated area of the cemetery.

Only men go to the cremation site. During the early days of

civilisation, cremation was carried out using a freshly cut pyre of wood and the fire was started by rubbing sticks together. Chopping the wood and lighting it required strength and this is why traditionally it was the son who would do this. There should not be any crying at the cremation site because it is believed that the soul will find it difficult to 'rest in peace'.

The pyre is made of a large pile of wood and the body is placed on the pyre and cremated. In cities (and certainly in foreign countries) the bodies are cremated in a crematorium. At crematoriums, camphor and ghee are placed inside the coffin with the body.

After the cremation, the ashes are collected and dissolved in the sea or river nearby. Many people take the ashes to India to disperse in the waters of the Ganges. Tamils consider Rameswaram in South India as significant as the Ganges. Mahatma Gandhi requested that his ashes were to be dissolved at 'Triveni Sangamam" at Kanniyakumari (Cape Comorin), at the southern most tip of India, where the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal meet.

The close family mourn for 31 days. Anthyesthi (second funeral rites) is carried out on the day before the thirty-first day ceremony. Only the immediate family is involved in this ceremony. In the morning the male members of the family arrive at the seaside where a hall is reserved for this type of ceremony. The priest conducts the ceremony using a special grass (therpai) and a clay stone to make the image of the deceased and a miniature funeral is repeated. Then food is offered to the departed soul. This is the final ritual and prayer given to the soul by the family. It is believed that until this ritual is performed, the soul is not sent to the next world and remains on earth as a 'ghost'.

At home other members of the family clean the house and prepare meals. After the arrival of the men everyone partakes in the meal.

On the 31st day, the priest purifies the home and a puja is conducted. (Two different rituals are carried out on this day, 'Ekodishta' (ekothiddam) and 'Sapindeekaranam'). Then a meal is given to family and invited friends.

At the yearly anniversary of the death (according to the lunar calendar), a priest conducts a special puja in the home in memory of the departed and alms are given to the presiding priest. This ceremony is done yearly as long as the sons of the deceased are alive.

Other Ceremonies

Thirtyfirst day ceremony

This is done following childbirth and funerals. In both cases the aim of the ritual is purification. The ceremony after funerals is described above under 'funerals'. For the childbirth ceremony, the house is swept and washed prior to a priest carrying out the cleansing ceremony. This is done after offering prayers to Pillayar. "*Panchakauvium*" (prepared according to the prescribed amounts of milk (five parts), curd (three parts), ghee (two parts), cow's urine (one part) and cow's dung (just a pinch or half the size of a thumb) and mixed together as a disinfectant) is sprayed over the heads of the occupants of the house and then sprayed all around the house using the tips of a few mango leaves. After a cleansing bath and change of dress, the baby and mother sit in front of the priest who conducts the necessary puja for the occasion.

Age Attainment Ceremony or Coming of Age Ceremony for Girls

It is called *"Samaththiya Sadangu"* or *"Poopunitha Neeraattu Vila"* in Tamil. It is also known as the "coming of age" ceremony. This ceremony is performed seven days after the girl has had her first menses (monthly period). As mentioned earlier, blood is considered unclean, so ritual purification needs to be done following the first menses. After the first menses the girl is considered "unclean" during her period (usually 3-5 days each month) and is not to enter a temple or partake in any auspicious functions.

Coming of age generally refers to when a girl is mature enough to have her first period and understands her responsibility towards family and society (she is physiologically ready to bear children). For this reason it is celebrated as an important event in a girl's life.

The girl's maternal aunt (*maternal* uncle's wife) gives her a bath on the first day of the menses. Then she is kept in isolation for few

days and fed with nutritious food such as sesame (gingerly) oil, fried brinjals, eggs, pasty pudding made out of urid dahl (lentil like bean with black skin and white interior), and sesame seeds mixed with jaggery (*Kali*). Sesame (gingerly) oil is used in the preparation of food.

On the day of the "*Samaththiya Sadangu*" the girl is bathed and dressed with her best sari and gold jewellery. A priest conducts a "Ganapathy Puja" (to remove all obstacles) followed.by a purification ceremony. Following this, traditional rituals are carried out by the women in the family. Eleven different types of "Alathi' with various items are carried out while she stands under a canopy made of flowers (*"Thiruthongal" - swing)*. Alathi are done to ward off "evil eyes" and to drive away any evil spirits. After this, photographs are taken with family and friends who bless the girl and give presents. It is followed by a vegetarian meal.

Veedu Kudi Pukuthal (Graha Pravesha)

This means moving into a new house. Prior to building a new house *Bhoomi puja* is carried out by way of worshipping the earth mother and getting her permission to build the house on the selected site. Following the puja a small pit is dug and auspicious items like sand from a holy place such as a holy river, five kinds of metals (like gold, silver and copper) and nine kinds of grains (Nava thaniyam) are put inside the pit (they are now available in ready made packets and sold in specialty shops). The house is then built on this site.

On the day of Graha pravesham, a purification ceremony is carried out first by sprinkling the house with holy water which is then followed by a puja. After this ceremony, at subha muhurtam (an auspicious time) the members of the family enter the house and start their new lives.

Ritual purification

The aim of the ritual purification is to remove un-cleanliness specifically defined for a particular type of spiritual activity, especially the worship of God. This un-cleanliness is not however identical with ordinary physical impurity (like dirt and stains). Blood (as in menses) and childbirth are viewed as unclean. Similarly, a death in the family

is considered unclean and a purification ceremony is necessary before the close members of the family are allowed to enter a temple or participate in any auspicious (religious) functions. (This may be on hygienic grounds rather than religious).

A woman with menses is considered unclean for 3-5 days (the duration of the bleeding). Childbirth is considered unclean for 31 days. These conventions were introduced at a time when infectious diseases were rampant and no vaccines or antibiotics were available. Close contact at congregations would easily spread diseases and result in serious consequences. Today these restrictions are not taken so seriously due to changes in disease patterns and improvement in their management.

The Place of Astrology in a Saivite's Life

Astrology is defined as the study of the movements and relative positions of the nine planets (Nava Grahas). These are some of the major governing forces interpreted as having an influence on human affairs (the earth). These Grahas influence the behaviour of all living beings. Astrology is one of the six disciplines of Vedanga ('body part' of the Vedas).

Horoscope is the construction of a birth chart, which shows the exact location of planets at the time of birth. It is in the form of a table representing the placement of planets in the zodiac for a particular place at a particular time and day. The Indian system takes into account that the zodiac is elliptic and not circular due to which the twelve houses in a birth chart are not 30 degree each but varying according to the time of birth.

Reading a horoscope (provided that the time of birth is correct and the reader is able) will describe the events that will happen in one's life such as one's career, marriage, family life and children. Before deciding on marriage, it is traditional to check for compatibility between the boy and the girl. Only if they are compatible is the marriage allowed to progress.

Muhurtham is an integral part of Indian astrology where the appropriate time for important/auspicious occasions such as weddings, purchases, building houses, moving houses, start of

religious events and practically every other religious function is chosen so that in all probability, it goes through smoothly and without hurdles.

Other common terms that you will hear relating to Saiva sacred days or when to carry out the annual puja (remembrance) for someone who passed away are:

Nakshatram: The moon revolves around the earth in roughly 27 days. During this period, the moon traces a path around the sky. The ancients split this path of the moon into 27 units and gave each unit the name of a star, star group or constellation. These twenty seven units are known as *nakshatras*.

Paksha: A period of 15 days covering one phase of the moon.

Thithi: A lunation is the interval between new moons, roughly 29.5 days. There are 14 thithis between every new moon and full moon and vice versa. The zeroth and the fifteenth thithis are of course the new moon and the full moon respectively.

Wheel of Time: The present age is known as the *Kali Yuga.* The scriptures divide the endless passage of time into a cycle of *Maha Yugas* or aeons. A Maha Yuga lasts 4.32 million years and is made up of a sequence of four different yugas, each with its own characteristics. These four yugas are the *Krta Yuga, Tretha Yuga, Dvaapara Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*. The first of these divisions (Krta) is also known as *SathyaYuga*, or the Age of Truth.

In the Sathya (Krta) Yuga, righteousness is at its peak. As time passes by, there's a gradual decline in virtue, which reaches its nadir in the Kali Yuga. At the end of the Kali Yuga, the Divine Will intervenes and restores the universe to its original state of virtue. This marks the beginning of the next Maha Yuga and the cycle thus continues.

A sequence of one thousand *Maha Yugas* is called a *Kalpa*. A Kalpa is one day in the life of Brahma, the Creator aspect of the *Trimoorthi* Trinity. The universe exists during Brahma's day and is dissolved during Brahma's night.

CHAPTER13: TAMIL-SAIVA MARRIAGES AND WEDDING CEREMONY

Most marriages among Tamils are arranged. This has happened in our society for many centuries. In an arranged marriage, the parents choose their son's or daughter's future spouse taking into account the wishes of their children. If either the son or daughter refuses the choice, the parents tend to respect their wishes and choose another possible spouse. The happiness of the child is the main concern, and the parents see their role as responsible facilitators and well-wishers (this is the case in majority of the households today).

In modern times there are also marriage brokers who specialise in arranging this (some for a fee and many as a free service). In some cases relatives or family friends play a major role in match making.

In most cases the horoscopes are matched first. It is always advisable to find out through every possible means whether the couple are compatible with each other. In arranged marriages the couple are often strangers to each other until the wedding day. Matching their horoscopes prior to the marriage is considered a very important part of the decision-making. It is done to ensure a harmonious, balanced and healthy marriage relationship. It is claimed that they match five major aspects of the marriage namely longevity, mental make up or nature, ability to give birth to children, health and separative tendencies (such as long separations or divorce).

These days, if they are matched and if both parents agree, the children have a chance to get to know each other over a longer period of time via e-mail, phone, or multiple "dates", before making a decision. They will then choose whom they wish to marry (this is the current form of arranged marriage).

Arranged marriages might ensure a higher probability of success because they tend to match persons of the same age, caste, religion, linguistic group, socio economic background, education, professional status and physical appearance. We used to refer to these criteria as *(abcde) a*ge, *b*eauty, *c*haracter, *d*owry, *e*ducation etc.

Arranged marriage has been traditionally associated with dowry. In some cases of arranged marriages, even today, parents still look for a dowry. The original purpose of dowry was financial security for the girl in case the husband died; the money could help the girl to look after her and the children (if any). This was set up at a time when wives did not go to work, there was no life insurance and a widow had no means to support herself otherwise. Today, most, if not all girls, are able to support themselves, and therefore do not need the dowry. Therefore dowries have become optional; most do not give or accept dowries.

In India and Sri Lanka, the divorce rate is very low (love marriages have a higher divorce rate than arranged marriages). This is often attributed to the fact that couples who enter into arranged marriages are usually more "traditional" and less likely to forfeit a marriage. Proponents of arranged marriages believe that parents can be trusted to make a match that is in the best interests of their children. There is also frequent criticism of arranged marriages being "loveless". This has, however, been disputed by many people in happy (arranged) marriages who claim that love grows in a marriage, even if the marriage does not start with love.

The Wedding

The wedding ceremony, as stated previously, used to be an all-day affair. The wedding was considered to be as important for the bride and groom as to the joyous coming together of two families. The Saiva wedding is a combination of worship, dedication, blessing and sermon. In Saiva tradition, the marriage is considered a life-long commitment between husband and wife. There are two ceremonies related to wedding ritual, the 'ponn urukku' and the wedding itself. All events related to the wedding are usually arranged on a day and at a time rendered auspicious by planetary positions.

Ponn urukku - Gold Melting Ceremony: A few days before the wedding a ritual meltdown of a gold coin is carried out by the family goldsmith. Parents and few family members attend this ceremony from both sides. This melted gold is later used to fashion the *Thaali* - the bridal pendant.

The wedding ceremony

On the morning of the wedding day, the bride and groom have *Mangala snaanam* (auspicious holy bath) in their respective homes. At the appointed time on the wedding day, the *Tholan* (the best man - the bride's brother and not the groom's friend as in Western culture) with a following of relatives sets off for the groom's house. The Groom is dressed in special clothes usually made of expensive silk with a turban (*thalaipa*), which is placed on his head by the Tholan, who then escorts him to the wedding hall.

A large and joyous procession of family and friends follow the bridegroom to the wedding venue. Professional musicians accompany the procession and play traditional wedding music. Sometimes there are also fireworks to celebrate the occasion. A decorated car is used as transport to the wedding venue.

On his arrival at the entrance to the wedding hall, which represents the bride's residence, her parents welcome the groom with a flower garland. The Tholan symbolically washes the bridegroom's feet as a sign of respect. The bridegroom rewards the tholan with a gold ring.

Two married women from the bride's family show the *alathi* (flame) to ward off the 'evil eye'. The bride's parents escort the groom and best man to the *manavarai* (altar) to the accompaniment of music from *nathaswaram* (a wind instrument used in most of the auspicious functions) and drums.

The Saiva wedding is a religious ceremony performed according to rituals described in ancient scriptures known as the agamas. In such a wedding ceremony the groom and the bride represent Lord Siva and his consort Parvathi. The bride and groom sit on an elevated platform (Manavarai) above the congregation on par with emblems of divinity. Below lays the holy ground, the ceremonial area where the priest sits and performs the rituals. The priest chants mantras throughout the ceremony to invoke the deities to be present during these ceremonies.

The following pujas are conducted individually for the groom and bride.

- **Sangalpam** – an expression of purpose.
- **Vigneswara puja** – worship of Lord Ganesha to remove all obstacles.
- **Punyahavacanam** – purification
- **Raksha Bandham** – tying of sacred thread for spiritual protection.

Coconuts are broken at various key moments during the ceremony representing the destruction of ego. The shell represents the ego and the kernel represents the soul.

Her bridesmaids and family accompany the bride to the manavarai. At the start of the ceremony the bride sits on the right side of the groom and receives the same pujas.

The main service now begins and consists of the following:

- **Siva - Parvathi puja** - the priest performs the prayer to Lord Siva and His consort Parvathi.
- **Navagraha puja** - the priest prays for the blessing of the nine planets.
- A **homam** (a sacred fire representing cosmic energy) is built to act as a vehicle to carry the offerings to the various deities during the ceremony.

The Priest says: (in Sanskrit)"We have come together to wed (bride), daughter of (bride's parents), to (groom), son of (groom's parents)." The priest reads out details of 3 generations of the lineage of the boy and the girl. Then he will say, "Today they build together the foundation of their marriage upon the earth, in the presence of the sacred fire (Agni) and the radiant sun and moon among their family and friends." He then gives the bride betel leaf with auspicious items and a gold coin. The bride's father places his hands around his daughter's hands, and with his wife, makes a pledge to give the daughter in marriage to the bridegroom. He hands the daughter to the bridegroom by placing his daughter's hands in the hands of bridegroom and sacred water is poured over the hands symbolizing the giving away of the daughter to the bride groom. (This is called **Kanya Thaanam**).

At this stage the **Thali** (wedding necklace), **Koorai** (the bridal sari) and other gifts from the bridegroom are taken around the guests to receive their blessings. The bride then accepts a tray containing the **Koorai** (Bridal sari) and other objects from the bridegroom and leaves to **change into the new sari**.

Upon the bride's return, the priest offers prayers to bless the Thaali and hands it over to the Tholi (usually the Groom's married sister), who in turn hands it over to the bridegroom to **tie the Thali** around the bride's neck, amidst chanting of mantras, a crescendo of music and the blessings of their family who shower flowers and saffron rice on the couple.

This is the most important and solemn moment of the ceremony, as the Thaali is the holy symbol worn by a Saiva woman to inform the world she is married and should be treated with respect befitting the status.



Fig.24. Tying of the Thali

Now she moves to the left side of the groom (husband), as is the case with Lord Siva and Parvathi (Arthanareeswarar - See Chapter 3). Remember, it was mentioned earlier that in a wedding ceremony the groom and the bride represent Lord Siva and his consort Parvathi.

(In India, instead of a Thaalikkodi, a saffron coated sacred thread with a piece of saffron tied like a pendant is handed over to the bridegroom. He puts it around his wife's neck and ties three knots. The three knots represent the union of mind, spirit and body).

The couple **feed each other milk and fruit**, symbolising their partnership for life with sweetness, prosperity and everlasting love. They also exchange garlands to symbolise their unification. The couple then steps around the homam.

The newly married couple accompanied by the tholan and tholi take seven steps (**Sapthapathi**) around the fire promising each other their eternal friendship as equal and opposite partners in life. The groom takes the bride's right hand in his left hand and leads her around the sacred fire three times, performing the following rituals:

- The groom places the bride's right foot on an **Ammi** (a granite grinding stone) and blesses her so that her character will be as strong and steadfast as the stone and so that she will bear all the difficulties in her life with courage and unwavering faith. The blessing is symbolised by the groom placing a silver ring (called 'metti' in Tamil) on the second toe of the bride's right foot.



Fig.25. Ammi Mithiththal

The priest places a **Gold ring in a pot of saffron water** and invites the bride and groom to find the ring. This demon strates the need for compromise between them throughout their married life.



Fig.26. Finding the gold ring

- The priest then points out the **star Arundhathi,** to remind them of the idyllic married life led by the sage Vasista and his wife Arundhathi. Vasista is one of the Saptarishis (seven great sages or rishis) in the Saptarishi mandala in the sky (a constellation of seven stars). Arundhathi appears as a separate star next to this constellation, staying closer to her husband.
- The priest, parents of the bride and bridegroom and their family bless the couple for a happy married life by the sprinkling of Arugu and saffron coated whole rice (referred to as **Arugu – Arisi** in Tamil). The arugu is a type of grass that is resilient. Therefore it signifies long life and saffron coated whole rice symbolises prosperity and contentment. The bride and groom seek the blessings of their parents by prostrating in front of them.
- The ceremony concludes with an **Alathi**. This is waving of a lamp on a tray with saffron and kunkumam to ward off any evil eye.

Now, all the relatives, friends and guests bless the couple and give them presents. Then, photographs are taken of the couple with family and friends.



Fig.27. Alathi

The function ends with a sumptuous meal.

With the wedding rituals over, the bride is escorted to the groom's house. She is welcomed into her new home with an alathi (see above). The next few days are spent visiting family members and close friends for a meal. After the meal the couple is given additional gifts in the form of a gold sovereign or cash.

In the past, weddings were conducted at homes and used to be an all-day affair. Modern Saiva weddings are often much shorter and do not involve all of the rituals of the traditional ceremony. These days, the wedding is normally conducted in a wedding hall or a temple under a canopy traditionally with four pillars (manavarai) and the ceremony is conducted by the priest with the sacred fire. The whole ceremony is condensed into an hour or two. After the wedding the evening reception marks a tone of informality with the guests meeting the couple and conveying their best wishes to their families. The wedding registration is carried out before or after the ceremony by the registrar of birth and marriages to make the union legal.

CHAPTER 14: EPILOGUE

Having come to the end of the book, let us review what we have learnt about Saivism. One thing I have tried to emphasise throughout this book is that Saivism is more than just a religion; it is a way of life. It is intrinsically linked with the culture of the people who practice it and it pervades every aspect of their lives.

Saivism is the name of the religion followed by those who worship Lord Siva as the supreme deity. It is the oldest religion in the world and is practised by many in South India, Sri Lanka and other parts of the world. It is to be differentiated from "Hinduism" which is not a religion by itself but a common name used to include many Indian religions, including Saivism.

Saivites are not polytheistic; Saivism speaks of one God. The different Gods and Goddesses are mere representatives of the powers and functions of the one supreme God.

In the cosmic dance by Natarajah, Siva is shown as the source of all movements within the cosmos and this explains Siva's five activities: *creation* (symbolized by the drum), *protection* (shown by the "fear not" hand gesture), *destruction* (the fire), *embodiment* (the foot planted on the demon Muyalagan), and *release* (shown by the foot held aloft).

Temple worship forms a major part of the Saiva way of Life. It helps us to keep the mind fixed on the God to whom we pray and to evolve spiritually. In temples we have consecrated idols which help us to contemplate easily on God.

The Scriptures of Saivism consist of twenty eight Saiva Agamas, twelve Thirumurai and fourteen Meikanda Sastras. These are considered as the Saiva canon. The Agamas describe various aspects of the external worship of God such as temple design, temple building, image making and temple rituals. Thirumurai are a collection of hymns in praise of various deities, while the Meikanda

Sastras are explanations of the philosophy of the Saiva religion. Even though the Vedas are accepted as part of the Saiva canon, many Vedic views are inconsistent and contradictory and so not acceptable to Saivism. Therefore the Agamas form the bedrock of rituals and philosophy of Saivism (because they are more precise).

The Philosophy of the Saiva religion is Saiva Siddhanta (meaning an established conclusion after considering all facts) and is encompassed in the *Meikanda Sastras.* These are the authoritative books of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. Saiva Siddhanta postulates three entities as eternal. They are *Pathi, Pasu and Pasam (God, Soul and Bondage).* Saiva Siddhanta philosophy explains the nature of these three entities, their relationship and clearly demonstrates the path to enlightenment (i.e. how the soul frees itself from the three bonds to attain salvation - mukthi).

There is a ritual associated with every aspect of the Saivite's life. The entire passage from birth to death is marked by a series of rituals and religious ceremonies, prayer and worship. The function of this is to constantly remind us of the purpose of our life which is realisation of God.

I'd like to end this book with a hymn from Thirugnanasambandar (one of the four samayacharayars – great teachers of Saivism):

"Mannil-nal lavanam vaala-laam vai-galum

ennil-nal lagathik-ki yaathu-mor kurai-vilai

kannil-nal lathurum kaLu-mala vala-nagar

pennil-nal laalodum perun-thagai irun-thathe".

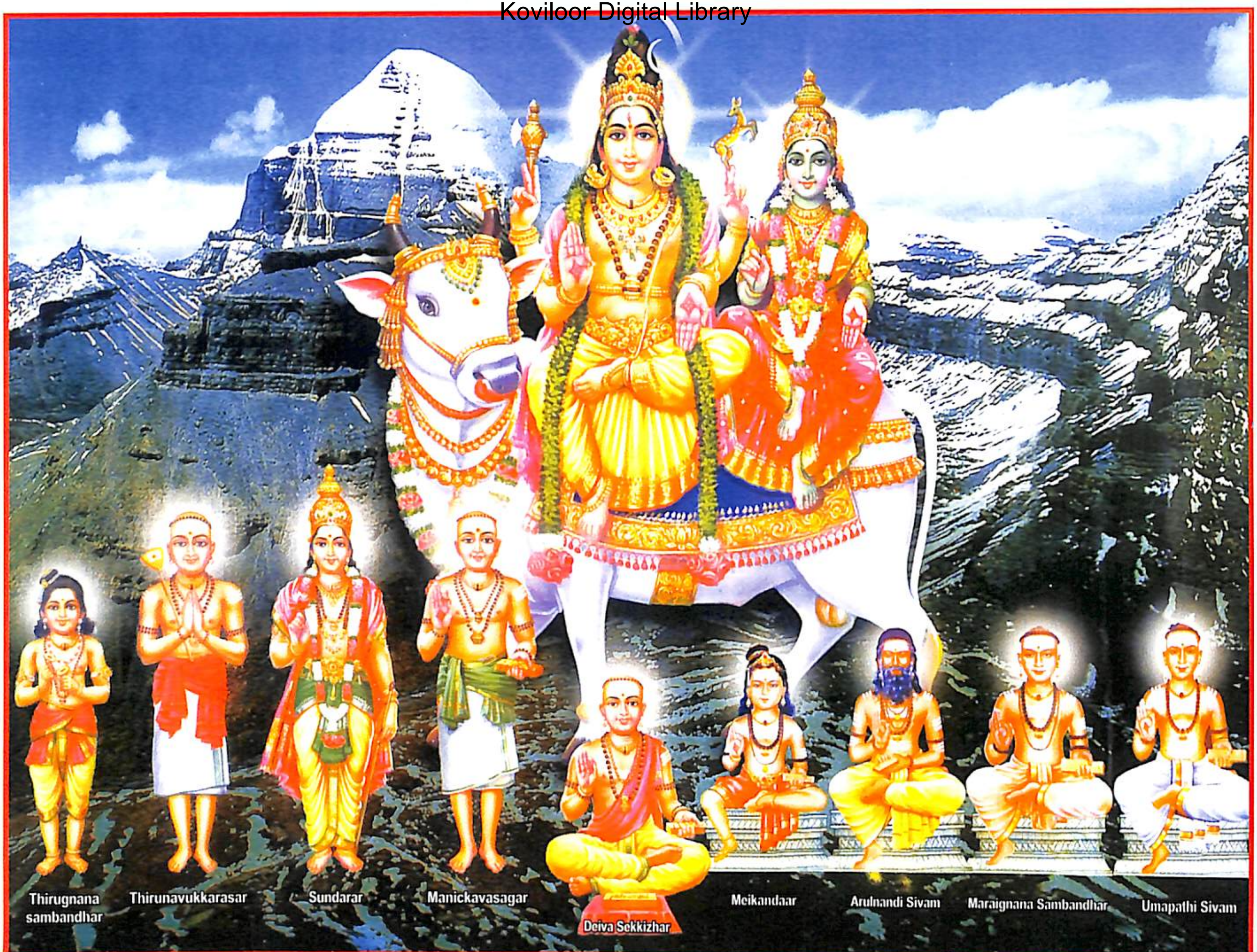
This encompasses what I believe to be the central tenet and practical worthiness of Saivism. Underneath all that has been mentioned in this book, the central aim of Saivism is to teach Saivites the flawless path of leading a virtuous life and liberation of the soul thereafter.

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Thirugnana sambandhar
Thirunavukkarasar
Sundarar
Manickavasagar
Deiva Sekkizhar
Meikandaar
Arulnandi Sivam
Maraignana Sambandhar
Umapathi Sivam



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While he was living in U.K. he started Saiva Siddhanta Centre in 1979. The Centre became the London Meikandaar Aadheenam in 1986.

In 1992 the World Saiva Council, which conducts Saiva Seminars and Saiva Conferences world wide, was founded by him. He is the author of 11 books. He entered Mahasamadhi on 2nd April 2003.



Dr. S. Ahnaimugan, M.B., B.S., F.R.C.O.G., is a medical practitioner who specialises in obstetrics and gynaecology, and practised in New Zealand, virtually all his professional life. He is very much interested in Tamil and its Saiva religion since his early childhood, and this continues to this day.

He has written a book in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tamil (MAKAPPERUM MAKALIR MARUTHTHUVAMUM) primarily for displaced women to help them understand their problems and communicate with the Doctors easily. The book was released in Canada and UK in 2003 and in Sri Lanka in 2005.

This book is written at the request of his son who was born and educated in New Zealand. It is meant for people who find it hard to understand many aspects of our religion; for example, the difference between Hinduism and Saivism, Saiva philosophy, etc. Dr. S. Ahnaimugan explains these facts in a very simple, easily understandable way in this book. He has also included some aspects of our way of life, as this and religion are almost inseparable.